A MATTER OF SENTIMENT

John Strange Winter.

AUTHOR OF

"THE TRUTH-TELLERS"

"A NAME TO CONJURE WITH"

&c. &c.

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To Heather

in

remembrance

of

John Kendrick Bangs Winter,

Spring 1903.

A Matter of . . . . Sentiment

A Matter of Sentiment

By

JOHN STRANGE WINTER

Author of

'Bootles' Baby,' 'A Magnificent Young Man,'
'Heart and Sword,' 'The Truth-Tellers,'
'The Career of a Beauty,' 'The Man I Loved,' Etc., Etc

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A MATTER OF SENTIMENT

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CHAPTER I.

LUCK.

"WHAT are you going to do with it?" said one.

"Invest it," replied the other.

"Out here?"

"No, at home. It isn't wanted out here. I don't want to increase my stake in this country. I shall have to go home in the end, and my old dad writes to me that there is a certain farm adjoining our place that he has coveted ever since I was a little chap in petticoats. It's for sale—I don't mean that there is going to be an auction, but it is for sale to any private bidder. I can get it for a bit less than the five thousand pounds that you and I have each got to play with. 'Twill round off the estate, make my old dad deliriously happy, and be a perfectly safe investment for the money. As soon as I can get down to the town I shall cable to the dad to secure it, within certain limits. What are you going to do with yours?"

"Mine?" said the other man, "mine?" He cast his eyes over the glowing Californian landscape, looked slowly round over the familiar scene, and then, fixing his eyes on the distant hills, he apparently fell into deep thought.

The younger of the two men looked at him with an expression of curiosity. They had been companions and partners for more than seven years; from the time that Dick Vincent had given up life in the Service for the sake of wintering in California. They had met by chance, the young fellow of three-and-twenty, the older one of some five or six and forty years of age. So far as worldly possessions went they were at that moment about equal. Dick's father had put a sum of five hundred pounds into an American bank for his son's use; Roger Meredith had but a few pounds short of that sum, as the result of a venture to which he had given several years of assiduous toil.

What drew the one to the other neither ever knew; perhaps the fact that both were gentlemen by birth, and that Meredith had been in his youth in the same regiment as Vincent had just left. Anyway, after their first meeting in a small hotel on the way West, they had seemed instinctively to chum together, and after a day or two of long talks and mutual inquiries as to the details of the past and hopes of the future, Dick Vincent suggested that they should put their money together and go into partnership.

The older man was nothing loth. "I like you, my lad," he said, in his bluff and outspoken way, "and I am willing to go in with you if you wish it. We are different ages, and we are different temperaments. I have had a rough and tumble existence since I came out here. I was unlucky at home. I fancy you will help me to keep square; I know I

shall keep you from being robbed. Here's my hand; I'm willing, and something more than willing, to go into partnership with you."

From that day the pair had been but little apart; from that day not one single cloud had ever come between them which in any way could mar the simple directness of their friendship. Dick, who had great respect for Meredith's opinion in all matters of business, never failed from first to last to give full value for his experience and maturer judgment; Meredith, on the other hand, never forgot that whatever Dick lacked in experience and judgment he gained in the consciousness of a clean and wholesome life.

As Meredith had said in the beginning, the partnership was calculated to keep him straight—he should have added "if anything could"—but there had been times when he had disappeared from the ranche on some flimsy pretext, and Dick Vincent had scoured the country in search of him, generally finding him in the most unlikely spot, in a state bordering on delirium tremens. For that was Roger Meredith's let-down—drink. Not the steady, soaking drinking which drags its victim into his grave and out of the road, but wild bursts of furious excess which would have wrecked the constitution of a less magnificent physique years before, and which would probably have brought Roger Meredith's turbulent life to a close long ago had it not been for his marvellous power of holding off for months at a time.

"Why," Dick said to him over and over again, "can't you be strong-minded enough to keep off it

altogether? You can go for six or seven months at a stretch and never let a drop of liquor pass your lips. Then you break out. And look at you now—a wreck!—your nerves smashed, can't sleep, can't eat, can't do anything. You are a strong man, you are a gentleman, you have a strong will; why don't you swear off it altogether?"

And always the reply was the same. "Yes; last time, my boy, last time. Never again as long as I live. This has taught me a lesson; seventeen days without a wink of sleep. Gad! it's enough to break down the strongest man that ever God put the breath of life into!"

"But is it really a swear-off?" Dick said to him on one occasion.

"Yes, old fellow; really a swear-off this time, damn me if it ain't!"

"It will damn you if you don't," said Dick.

"I know it—I know it—I know it, old fellow. You can't tell me anything I don't know. I lie awake at night, and I think of the past, and I think of the present, and I think of the future; and it's all black and dark. It's as if a devil had got hold of me. I never drink for pleasure—I don't take the least pleasure in it; but I go down on business, and I meet some pal that I have known years ago. It looks so churlish to refuse a drink as a sign of good fellowship, and when I've taken one I forget and take two, and when I've taken two I want three, and when I've had three I must have a fourth, and when I've had four—I don't know what happens; then, I suppose I go on. I don't sleep that night, and the

next day I go on again, and again, and you come and find me. It's always the same, but it isn't pleasure. However, I've got off it this time, and it shall be the last, I promise you; I give you my sacred word of honour. And you must help me, Dick. You are a good lad—perhaps you don't understand the temptation—but you can help me if you will. Don't let me go down to the town; don't let me out of your sight. If I begin to wander, come after me."

"I always do," said Dick.

"Yes, I know. You are a good lad; it will come home to you one of these days."

"Besides," Dick went on, "if you have a mind to wander, how am I going to stop you? You stand five inches taller than I do; you are like a Hercules compared to me; I have got no more than a small influence over you, Roger, old fellow, and when you are determined to go to the bad it's no use preaching to you. If I were you and you me I could take you by the throat and say, 'You shan't stir a step!' But what chance should I have against you? Why, you would just get your finger and thumb on my windpipe, and it would be all U P with me!"

From his long armchair Roger Meredith laughed. Compared with the mighty volume of sound which usually constituted a laugh from him it was no more than a feeble and cracked cachinnation.

"It's the last time, my boy. I've sworn off for good and all. 'Pon my word and honour, as I was once a gentleman."

"Don't talk rot!" said Dick. "You are a gentle-

man still; you'll always be a gentleman. Kings and princes have been befooled with the demon of drink before now."

"Yes, I know they have. Don't make any excuse for me; there isn't any excuse for me. It makes me sick when I think of all I've chucked away in the past, just because a devil I put into my mouth steals away my brains and my nerve, and makes a besotted beast of me. Don't talk about its being rot; I tell you drink's the hell upon earth. When we get to a hell afterwards, it will be a hell where we shall drink and drink and drink, and there will be no sleep; there will be nothing but drink—no food. Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Keep me from it, Dick. We have been pals for seven years now; keep me from it if you have to tie me down to a chair."

"All right, old chap; next time I see you getting restless I'll chain a log to your leg, or something of that kind. But you might give me a hint. You see, you always go off with such a deuced amount of secrecy; and you are so wily that I never know when the fit's coming on. If you would only give me a hint that you are beginning to feel like breaking out I could be up-sides with you."

"I never feel it," Meredith cried; "it comes on me all of a sudden. I go down town on business; I meet some fellow I know; naturally he says, 'Come and have a drink, old chap!' I can't say 'No'—men out here think you such an ass—and then I take a glass, swear to myself I won't take a second, and—somehow, I always forget. Then the mischief's done."

"Old fellow," said Dick, "I shouldn't like to propose this if you hadn't broached the subject to me yourself, but don't trust yourself down in the town without me. When there's business to be done, let's go together and do it."

"Right you are, Dick! I'll not go to town again without you. I can't say fairer than that. I mean it when I say I want to get out of this thraldom. I hate to feel that I am weak-minded and can't trust even myself. I won't go down the town again without you."

Now it happened that going down the town meant a road journey, I might more correctly say a land journey, of about forty miles. It was not much of a town even at that; and consisted of no more than a few wooden huts and sheds, and a corrugated iron drinking saloon. Did the friends want to go further afield and take a trip to San Francisco, or in the direction of New York, they had a still further journey of forty miles before they could get aboard the cars of the Great Pacific Railway.

After Roger Meredith had given the promise that he would not go down into the town without Dick, things had gone much more smoothly. For several months he had not shown any signs of wishing to turn his back, even for a moment, on the ranche. Then they went several times down to Freeman's Rock together, and once took a fortnight's holiday in 'Frisco itself.

After that came a great run of luck. Up to that time they had done well enough, but not more than that. Then, one happy day, they made a discovery

of oil upon their land—not in such quantities as made them or was likely to make them millionaires, but on the evening on which my story opens they had had a great reckoning up, and had the pleasure of looking in one another's faces and congratulating each other upon a balance of ten thousand in solid pounds to their credit, over and above their profitable estate.

Dick Vincent had already given his friend an idea of how he meant to invest his share of the luck. "And now, old fellow," he said, "what are you going to do with yours?"

Roger Meredith did not reply for a moment, and Dick sat looking at him in interested expectation. "I am going to invest mine, too," he said at last.

"Here?" Dick asked.

"No; not here. Over there!" jerking his thumb in the direction which to both of them meant the old country. "I have been thinking—I have been thinking a lot lately. I want you to do something for me when you go home, old fellow. You will be gone three months?"

"Well, I think I have earned a three months' holiday, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have earned it; you have earned everything that you've got. But, old chap, I wish you weren't going home."

"Why don't you come with me? It's perfectly safe for us both to go over for three months; everything is in fettle for the autumn, and Jack Frogg is such a splendid fellow we can safely leave it all to him. Come home, Roger, old fellow; come home

and see my people, who have heard such a lot about you. They'll give you a welcome, no fear of that!"

"I am not afraid of that," said Meredith. "I'd like to go home for some things; I've not set foot in old England since I came out here fifteen years ago."

"What are you afraid of?"

"What makes you think I am afraid at all?"

Dick smiled. "I know you pretty well, old chap."

"Yes, and you are right. I am afraid of what I might find when I got there. It doesn't do when you've cut yourself adrift to turn up again without knowing what sort of a smash your presence may make."

"Old fellow?" said Dick.

"Yes. I never told you that I had a wife and child in the old country, did I?"

"Never breathed it; never hinted at it."

"But I have—or I had. I might go home later on, when you come back for three months. I don't feel like going this time. Later on. And besides that I don't feel sure, till you've left me for three months by myself, whether I'm safe to be let loose in ordinary cities among ordinary temptations."

Dick stretched out a hand and clasped his friend hard upon the shoulder. "Safe as a church, old chap! Why, you've never had a breakdown for nearly two years! You will keep it up when I am gone, won't you? You won't let yourself go?"

"No, I'll try not. I intend to live the life of a hermit; and if I weather the three months when I've not got you to watchdog me, I shall be pretty safe for the rest of my life!"

CHAPTER II.

A REVELATION.

"DICK," said Roger Meredith, looking out from a great cloud of blue smoke, "were you astonished to hear that I am married?"

"Yes, I was a bit," said Dick. "Why have you kept so close about it?"

"Oh, it was one of the things I couldn't talk about."

"Didn't you get on with her?" Dick asked.

"Yes, I always used to. But things went wrong somehow. I came out here determined to make a home for her and to get myself pulled straight again. I had a sort of crazy notion that I should find fewer temptations in a new country than I had done in the old one. Never was a greater fallacy! All countries are full of temptations, and I drank worse out here than I had done over there. I was a handsome man when I came West——"

"Oh, well, I don't know that you are exactly ugly now, old chap."

"No; I know exactly what I am like. I was a fine man once. As far as my carcase goes I am a fine man now; I appear as well as ever I did, but I carry the marks of what's gone down my throat on my face. I shall carry them till I die. When you get like that, and your wife is pretty, and dainty, and fastidious, I

tell you, old chap, it makes you shirk going home and showing yourself changed so that she might turn from you in disgust. I want to go home; I've been wanting to go home ever since I came out here; but I don't want to go home poor. I came out to make a fortune; I have made a living, and that's all. If she had come with me, as she wanted to, with the child, I should have made a better living perhaps. I might have kept straighter—not since I knew you, old chap, but before that. Remember I had been out here eight years when you came across me; if I hadn't had a constitution like iron, I should have gone under long before you turned your back on the old regiment."

"But did your wife want to come out?"

"She wanted to come out when I left her. I gave her all the money I could scrape together—she had a few pounds of her own, some fifty pounds a year—I gave her what I had, I took what would barely carry me into a likely neighbourhood for work, and I never wrote home again."

"What?"

"I didn't. Oh, I'll make a clean breast of it. I acted like a brute—I did worse, I acted like a fool. I said to her, 'If I don't succeed, you'll hear nothing of me again.' Ah, how well I remember the tears coming into her eyes, and how she put her little head back and said, 'I shall hear of you again, Roger. You are bound to do well.' But, old fellow, it's taken me fifteen years to do it; and although five thousand pounds is a decent sum of money, it's nothing to swagger about."

"Ah, well, we're worth a great deal more than that. We have the ranche to the good; and where that five thousand pounds came from there will come another five thousand pounds; and perhaps another, and yet another. Don't be downhearted, Roger, you are in the beginning of better things; so am I, and it's very pleasant for both of us. Then you are going to invest it in England?"

"I am going to send it home to England. I want you to be my instrument; I want you to go and find my wife—I will pay the money into the bank to your order—and I want you to see whether she wants it; to find out how she feels towards me, and if she is just the same; to tell her the kind of life I've lived; to give her an idea of what I am like to-day; to let her know that I've never supplanted her or forgotten her. Find out if there is any chance left for me."

"You had better get your photograph taken."

"My photograph?"

"Yes. Come down with me as far as New York and get a first-rate photograph taken; that will help you better than anything."

"I might; I'm looking pretty fit—yes, I might. It would take me out of the loneliness that I am dreading, for part of the time at all events."

"Supposing she wants to come out here?"

"The ranche is wide enough," said Meredith, "the house is big enough. We can add to it, if necessary, only you must make her clearly understand that I've had fifteen years of a rough life, a hard life. I am not the Roger Meredith who went away; my English tailor wouldn't know me."

"Oh, my dear chap, I don't think, married man that you are, that you understand women. I'll tell her what sort of a fellow you are now; I'll make her understand the exact situation—leave it to me; and perhaps her first thought will be that her complexion is not what it was, her waist less tiny, and all the rest of it. I suppose I can satisfy her on that score?"

"Why, yes. There's no fear that she will have altered as I have done. Time works ravages upon us all, but the ravages of time produce one effect, and the ravages of drink another."

"Well, never mind, old chap, you don't drink now, you've quite given it up; you've not touched a drop for nearly two years past. You look as fit as a fiddle, you are as hard as iron and as strong as a horse. Don't get brooding too much over yourself, but leave it to me, old fellow—leave it to me."

"But there's another thing," said Meredith.

"Yes?"

"I have been away fifteen years."

"Yes; so you say."

"I have never written home; she may think me dead. Supposing when you've traced her out you find that she has taken my death for granted, and she is married again?"

"Well? What then?"

"I shouldn't feel," Meredith went on in a hard set voice, while his eyes wandered away to the distant hills, "I shouldn't feel justified in disclosing myself to her. Dick, it cuts me to the very heart to think such a thing; it makes me sick with fear that it may be so. I have kept silent all these years, even to you,

because I'd failed in what I came out to do; and now that I have done it I can talk more freely. I had better tell you everything that's in my mind, and then you'll know how to deal with the situation as you find it. If Clara——"

"So that's why you called the ranche 'Santa Clara'?"

"Of course. If Clara is married again she must be left in ignorance, and I shall stay out here for the rest of my life. I shall never go home again. I always thought that chap, Enoch Arden, was a weak fool to come back and disturb that wretched woman's peace and happiness. There were two Enoch Ardens, you know, Dick; there was one who was a man, and one who was a snivelling sort of a chap that was better out of the way—better dead. I don't want to be like him."

For a moment or two there was silence between the friends.

"I don't think, somehow, that I shall find her married," said Dick at last.

"You may do, and it's best to be prepared for any contingency, isn't it, Dick? I've got a photograph of her here. Would you like to see it?"

"I should."

Meredith dived down into an inner pocket and brought to view a small leather case bound with silver.

"Hullo!" said Dick, "I never saw that before."

"I know you didn't. I've always had it in my pocket here, so that I could carry it without anyone else being the wiser. There she is. It was taken

only a few months before I came away. She was a pretty girl, she must be a pretty woman still; too pretty to have passed unnoticed all these years."

Dick Vincent stretched out his hand and took the portrait from his chum. I think when one first sees the portrait of a person who has been very much praised by another, one is always conscious of a feeling of disappointment. For a moment Dick's only feeling was to hide from his companion the astonishment and blank dismay that he felt. Before him he saw the picture of a young woman, small and inclined to be plump, very fair, with wide-open blue eyes, a perky little nose, and a round innocent-looking face. Not a young woman whom he would at any time have called even passably pretty, and in marked contrast to the square, heavy, passionate face of the man sitting opposite to him.

"Is she little?" he asked, more by way of gaining time than from curiosity.

"A little tiny thing, barely up to my elbow," said Meredith. "A little soft plump thing with pretty ways. I don't know how I had the heart to leave her; I have never known; I was desperate. It seemed the only thing to do—to take my great hulking self out of it and leave her what there was to keep the child alive on."

"And you are her lover still?"

"I have never been anything else," said Meredith.

"And I never even guessed."

Meredith stretched out his hand to take the picture again. "I am not the kind of man who talks and makes confidences," he said, taking a long satisfied

look at the pictured face, "I am a reserved sort of fellow—never was one more so. I have tried to tell you all the same, more than once, but until now I never had the heart to speak of her, or the face."

"I can't see that. I can't think why you didn't send for her to come out."

"Because I had been out here eight years before I made five hundred pounds. I had kept body and soul together, it's true. When I met you I was about five hundred pounds to the good; we've done fairly well, old chap, but it's been nothing to boast about until now, nothing to write home about with a flourish of trumpets and say, 'See! I've made a fortune; I am flourishing!' No, no; I had kept silent for eight years, and it was best to go on."

"Perhaps it wasn't best for her."

"Perhaps it wasn't; perhaps it was. Time will show, and you will know before I shall. Then you will do that for me, old fellow? You will go and look her up?"

"But you don't expect she is still in the same place where you left her?"

"She might be. I left her in London. Anyway, the trustee of her little property is bound to be in the same place, or he'll have left traces behind him. I shall give you his address and his name, and you can go and see him and casually find out about her and about the child, without giving me away the least little bit in the world."

"I don't quite see how."

"No, neither do I, but you must."

"All right," said Dick, "I'll do my best."

"And if you find there's a 'Philip' in the case, then you just come back as mum as I've been all these years, and I'll go on for the rest of my life at Santa Clara."

"All right, old fellow. And if there is a 'Philip,' what am I to do with the money?"

"Oh, the money? Well, you can use your discretion about that. You see, there was a little kid; she was just three when I came away; she may want a dot. Use your discretion, old chap, and you'll satisfy me. You know me well enough by this time to know what I should do if I were there in your shoes."

"And supposing," said Dick, drawing rather hard at his pipe and speaking in jerks between the puffs, "supposing there's no 'Philip'—just supposing, old fellow, on the off chance—well, supposing I find that the little woman has been looking for you back all these years—more than willing to come out—am I to use my discretion then?"

For a moment Meredith did not speak. "Bring her out here?" he said at last, "here?"—and he looked round at the corrugated iron hut, for it was little more, with its broad veranda, its rough chairs, its wholly unadorned bachelor appearance, and then he looked back at Dick. "Don't you think," he said slowly, "that it would scare any woman to come out to this?"

"No, I don't," said Dick, stoutly; "not any woman that was worth bringing."

"But think of this—this bare, beggarly place, compared with Frith's place for instance."

"Well, the house is just as good as Frith's house, and the verandah is wider; our chairs are bigger. It isn't got up inside as Frith's house is, but then Frith's wife is with him. When your wife has been with you three months, old fellow, you'll not know this hut, and you and I won't know each other. Remember you have got money enough now to bring up any things that are necessary to make the place habitable and fit for a lady; and then, of course, don't forget that it was only a supposition. Perhaps I shall find a 'Philip'."

Meredith's square face sank; his great beetling brows bent themselves down over his fierce eyes, and his huge moustache bristled up on either side of his great hook nose.

"You are right," he said. "For a minute or so I let my thoughts run on too fast. I almost fancied that I saw her here already. It only shows," he went on with a reckless kind of laugh, "what havoc a little sentiment can play with a man, even a man as hard, and practical, and commonplace as I am."

"You are practical, that is perfectly true; but I have never known you either hard or commonplace," said Dick. "I know when I had that go of fever you nursed me like a woman."

"Oh, stop that!" cried Meredith.

"And when Lassie got her foot crushed——"

"Shut up!" growled the other.

"Yes, I'll shut up, but you know what I mean."

A groan from Meredith was the only reply which he vouchsafed to this real Englishman's eulogy. The two puffed away in the gathering darkness for

a few minutes. Then Dick Vincent broke the silence.

"I have a sort of idea, Roger," he said, "that there is going to be a change. I feel it all round me; not from what you've told me to-night, but for days past. I feel that you and I are both of us on the brink of a change; things are going to be better with us, old fellow. If we are not millionaires, we are going to be comfortably off; and I don't know that that isn't the happier position of the two. I have felt ever so many times lately that we should be happier and better off if we were both married. Life's a miserable thing for a man without some womenkind. I feel that there are going to be great results from this trip home of mine; I have a conviction of it."

"My dear Dick," said the other, "you have put new hope and new life into me to-night; you have given me a new incentive to keep straight while you are away. If it happens that you are able to bring her back again, well and good. She'll come out here, and afterwards, when you see somebody that you fancy, we can build another house on the ranche, for there's plenty of room, and there will be plenty of money."

"But supposing I find a 'Philip'?"

"Well, I've told you what will happen to me, therefore you need not let any thoughts of me stop you from bringing a wife out here as soon as you like—only in that case let's add to this house. Don't turn out, or turn me out into another; I couldn't stand living by myself. I shouldn't last three months."

"Old fellow," said Dick, stretching out his hand

towards the glow of the other's pipe, "I understand you perfectly, and I shall never forget as long as I live how entirely unselfish you are and always have been to me. I don't know," he went on, in a lighter tone, "that I shall ever avail myself of your generosity, for I have never seen the girl yet that I would thank you to put in command over me. Still, there's no knowing; and a ranche with a woman on it is not half as forlorn a business as one that is run only by men. So, for both our sakes, old fellow, you may rest assured that I shall do my level best to bring a mistress home to Santa Clara."

CHAPTER III.

TEMPTATION.

A FEW days later Meredith and Dick Vincent turned their backs upon Santa Clara and set off towards the great cities. Both men had discarded the flannel shirts and moleskin trousers which was their habitual wear on the ranche, both were dressed in the ordinary tweed suits of Englishmen, and if Meredith had looked a magnificent animal, as he did, in his working clothes, he showed to supreme advantage in a rough brown suit of excellent cut which showed off his massive proportions extremely well.

"Old fellow," said Dick, when he first encountered him dressed for the journey, "I believe it's worth while to wear moleskins and red flannel shirts as a regular habit, if it is only to see the difference that it makes when one gets into regular clothes. You look as fit as a fiddle in that kit. You had better change your mind and go the whole way with me."

"No, I can't do that," said Meredith, rather gloomily.

"You can keep out of sight, you know, whilst I prosecute inquiries. You can stay at my place while I go and find out whether there is a 'Philip' or there isn't."

"No, I am not fit for civilised society," Meredith returned, "and I wish I hadn't promised to go down

as far as New York with you—indeed, I don't know that I shall."

"Nonsense, old chap! You don't know what's good for you. I shan't go down to New York unless you do go. I'm not going to have you brooding alone here. You had much better make up your mind to go all the way, and lie low until I have done all the necessary detective business."

"No, no; second thoughts are never best, it's the greatest fallacy in the world to say that they are—put forward by some ass who wanted a good excuse for breaking a promise or indulging himself in something or other."

"But you have not made a promise that you won't go to England."

"No, I have not, but I have made up my mind; and although I don't say my mind is any great shakes as a mind, at the same time, such as it is I am going to stick to it."

So the two friends went down to Freeman's Rock together, accompanied so far by Jack Frogg, who had various business to do in the little town, and who, after parting with them, would bring the wagon and horses back to Santa Clara.

"You will be down every week?" said Meredith the last thing to the manager.

"Yes, every week; every Saturday," was the reply.

"Then I shall write to you to Ainslie's to let you know what day I shall come back. Then you can either wait for me or come down again, as it suits you."

"Right you are, Boss," was the reply.

"Better change your mind and go on to England with me," put in Dick at this juncture.

"Right you are there," was the free and easy remark of the manager. "There's nothing doing here now, and there won't be anything until early fall. The Boss can be spared perfectly well. And he knows me," Jack Frogg went on, "he knows I am a square man who would look after his interests properly."

"Yes, I know you are, Jack," rejoined Meredith, promptly, "I know you are. You are a good sort, but it don't suit my book to think of going home this trip, so don't either of you say another word about it."

The three men spent the rest of the day together in Freeman's Rock, and in the early morning Jack Frogg saw his two employers off by the coach which runs from Freeman's Rock down to Midas Creek. Frogg himself was going to start on his homeward journey an hour or two later. It was part of the creed of the management of Santa Clara that unless absolutely necessary the animals on the estate, especially the horses, should never be over-pressed. He would drive half way home, stop for a couple of hours' rest and feed at a house half way, and arrive at Santa Clara in the early evening.

The ride from Freeman's Rock to Midas Creek was one of a little over forty miles. The roads were bad, and the coach crowded. Dick soon found that Meredith was not inclined for talk, and suffered him to relapse into silence; and so he sat in his corner, smoking hard and staring gloomily right ahead of him, taking no notice of the rough fun that was

bandied from one to another. One or two of the passengers made efforts to draw him out, but when at last, goaded into speech, he replied to their sallies, it was with such savage brevity that their efforts at cheery friendliness soon ceased, and he was left entirely to himself.

At last they reached Midas Creek. It was a somewhat larger place than Freeman's Rock, and better worthy of being called a town. The coach drew up at the principal hotel, a long, rambling building which had begun as a shanty and had been added to as the needs of the place grew. The landlord came out to receive the coach and its freight of passengers, an Englishman, cheery, and smooth of voice. He told them collectively that a good dinner was waiting within, and bade them all a genial welcome.

Meredith swung into the house without a word; Vincent paused to pass the time of day in return to the landlord's greeting. Ten minutes later they were settled at the table along with all the other passengers.

"I will take rye whiskey," said Meredith.

Dick looked up. Meredith carefully avoided his eye.

"Blingee whiskley," said the Chinese boy, who was attending to the wants of the various diners. "Blingee d'lectly."

"I say, Roger," said Dick in an undertone.

Meredith took no notice. Dick gave him a vigorous nudge with his knee.

"Roger!"

"What the devil do you want?"

"I say, old chap," he muttered into his ear, "don't start on whiskey. You are put out."

"What the —— is that to you?"

"Don't do it, old chap."

"D—— it all! Can't I do as I like? Am I to be kept in leading-strings by a little whipper-snapper like you? I'll drink what I like—and do what I like."

"All right. I wasn't thinking of trying to coerce you by physical means. A man of five-foot-ten of my build wouldn't have much of a chance against a giant like you. I speak for your own sake. It won't make much difference to me."

"Very well, then; shut up and hold your row. It's my affair, not yours."

Thus rebuffed, Dick turned his attention to his right-hand neighbour, and began talking to him in cool and measured tones. For a minute or two Meredith sat without turning his head. Then he stealthily glanced in Dick's direction, saw that he was absolutely unruffled, so turned his eyes to his plate again; but when the Chinese boy brought the whiskey he helped himself liberally and dashed in a modicum of cold water.

Then he pushed the bottle to Dick. "Whiskey, Dick?"

"Thanks," said Dick, "thanks," and he, too, helped himself, though much more moderately than Meredith had done.

They were all more or less tired after the long drive, and when the dinner had been cleared away, every one of the men dropped out and took up their

positions in various parts of what the landlord, with a remembrance of his English country home, always spoke of as the "house place." Here Meredith settled himself down in a great rocking-chair. Dick followed him by a sort of protective instinct. Meredith, upon whom the several glasses of rye whiskey which he had taken during the course of dinner had begun to tell, looked up suspiciously at him.

"Are you afraid I can't be trusted, Dick?" he asked.

"For the matter of that," answered Dick, "I know you can't. Old chap, you are moody and upset at my going away from Santa Clara. Take my advice; send a line back to Frogg and come on all the way with me. You will be better for it—I shall be better for it. But for goodness' sake, don't drink any more whiskey to-night."

"Look here, young 'un," said Meredith, "it strikes me I have been in leading-strings long enough to you. I am sick of it. I have lived the life of a dog these last few months. I am going to end it now for good and all."

"You are not going to quarrel with me, are you?" asked Dick.

"Quarrel with you? No, I am not going to quarrel with anybody; but there is too much supervision about you—too much superiority."

"Oh, Roger! Why, old fellow——"

"Yes, I know, I know. You know what's going to happen as well as I do. I've got another drinking fit coming on. You know it's no good to stop me; wild horses couldn't do it. I didn't sleep last night.

I felt as soon as I got on to that coach that I should start drinking as soon as I got here. Spare your breath. I'm hard on for a regular burst."

"What about Santa Clara?"

"Santa Clara?"

"And the mistress that I've got to bring back if I come?"

"Ha! ha! You'll find another 'Philip,'" Meredith cried with a wild sneer. "At all events, a glass or two to-night won't make much difference. If there isn't a 'Philip,' you can send me a cable and I'll put myself into training to receive a lady."

One or two other men came up, and Dick turned away. He knew from old experience that it was perfectly useless to argue the point any further; on the contrary he stepped straight out in search of the landlord.

"Look here, landlord," he said, drawing him aside from the rest of the company, "I want you to do me a favour."

"Why, yes, if I can, sir, of course I will."

"My friend, Mr. Meredith, I am afraid, is going on the drink. I want to stop it. I have the most urgent reasons for wanting him to keep straight just now. He is perfectly unmanageable when he is drinking; he hasn't touched a thing for nearly two years until to-night. Can't you help me by watering his whiskey or something?"

"Yes, I can do that, provided he doesn't help himself to the bottles of any of the others."

"I wish you would, you'd be such a good chap. He is one of the sort that drink maddens; it takes

away all chance of sleep, and I shan't be able to go forward on my journey if he gets on the rampage here. Do your best, landlord."

"I will that same, sir. Boy, whose orders are you going for now?"

"Big gen'l'man—Meledith," answered the boy.

"What has he ordered?"

"Bottle whiskley. Velly quick."

"All right, I'll come. I'll make it half-and-half," he added in an undertone to Dick.

Dick turned back into the more crowded part of the "house place." What would have happened if Meredith had received the bottle of whiskey undoctored it is impossible to say; as it was, he sat drinking far into the night, and when at last he reeled off to bed, he was as royally drunk as ever he had been in his life.

To Dick he was amiability and apology itself. "Old chap," he said, as Dick helped him up from the rocking-chair, "I've broken out to-night. I'm awfully sorry. To tell you the truth, old fellow, I—I feel—at least I felt depressed and morose; and—fact was I dreaded your going away—fact was, old chap, you are—you are a sort of drag on the wheel. See?"

"Yes, I see," said Dick, "but what about Santa Clara and the mistress?"

"Oh, well, she won't mind. Just once, you know. Have a cold pump on my head to-morrow morning—and we'll get on the cars and be out of this. Fact is, old chap, I'm a poor sort of tool, take me all round. You've got the patience of Job with me."

"Don't take any more to-morrow," said Dick, holding him tight by the arm and looking at him anxiously, "don't do it, old fellow. Every burst you make you slip back years. Promise me you won't take any more."

"Oh, promise? Anything—anything. Put my name to it if I could see to write."

"Give me your word—that will be quite enough," returned Dick.

"Give you a hundred and fifty words. Gad, I would that same! Haven't enjoyed it—feel much worse for it—be chippy in the morning. Help a chap to bed."

So Dick helped him to bed, and saw him safely asleep. Truth to tell, he was utterly tired himself. The anxiety and strain of trying to keep his partner straight had taken as much out of him as a long day's work would have done. As soon as he had seen Meredith safely asleep, he turned in himself, and slept a sound and dreamless sleep until the day was far advanced.

When he awoke he opened his eyes with a start, glanced across to the other bed, and saw that it was empty. He got up and began hastily dressing.

"By Jove!" his thoughts ran. "What did I want to sleep like this for? All because of being so infernally easily knocked up. Now that chap's gone out, and goodness knows what has happened to him."

He hustled into his clothes, making a very scanty toilet, and hied him in search of Meredith. Alack, and alas, he found him sitting in the bar, a bottle of

rye whiskey in front of him, his glass three-parts full. It looked to Dick as if it was neat.

As he perceived his friend standing at the door, Meredith caught up the glass and tossed off the contents at a single gulp. Dick strode up to him.

"What did you promise me?" he asked in a furious voice.

"I don't know," said Meredith, "and I don't care."

"You promised me you wouldn't touch another drop."

"Did I? What a —— fool I must have been! My dear old boy, I've had nearly a bottle full this morning. It's bad whiskey, as I've been telling the landlord; one has to drink quarts of it before it has any effect."

"Roger, you promised."

"Was I drunk when I promised?"

"Yes, you were drunk."

"Well, my dear fellow, you couldn't expect a drunken man to keep his promise. I know I went off to bed last night in a good temper with everybody, and I'm pretty good-tempered this morning; but if I'm roused——"

"Oh, come, don't give me any of that rot! You made me a promise, and you've broken it—that's the long and the short of it."

"Yes," said Meredith, "that's the long and the short of it."

He stretched out his hand and poured out nearly a tumblerful of the raw spirit.

"I'm d——d if you shall drink that," said Dick, snatching at the glass.

In an instant Meredith was on his feet, the bottle in his hand. "You think," he cried, flourishing it around, "that you are going to bully over me—over me? Why, I could squeeze your windpipe for ever with a twist of my finger and thumb. Put that glass down!"

"No!" said Dick.

"Put that glass down, I tell you."

"No, not if you brain me!" said Dick, fixing him with his steady blue eyes.

Meredith sat down again. "Very well, then, do the other thing. I don't like drinking out of the bottle, it isn't gentlemanly; but since you drive me to it, there's no choice." And then he raised the bottle to his lips and took a long drink.

CHAPTER IV.

THE END OF IT.

FROM the moment that Roger Meredith raised the bottle to his lips Dick Vincent completely lost control over him. Beyond arranging with the landlord to water the whiskey, he was powerless to do more than sit down and wait the issue of events. For one thing Meredith was, as I have said, a man of enormous stature and of immensely powerful physique; it would have been impossible to use force, at all events useless for Dick to do so, and Dick was the only person in the hotel who was deeply interested in keeping Meredith straight.

He gave up all idea of proceeding further on his journey, and determined to sit down and wait, with what patience he could, the usual issue of the drinking bout. Meredith's drinking bouts had always gone on the same lines—a few days of mad drinking, then a period of sleeplessness with fits of uncontrollable frenzy. Between the inability to sleep, and the inability to eat, even Meredith's magnificent strength would break down in time, and with the helplessness of weakness would come the chance to knock off drink entirely and start life again with the diet of a little child. Then Dick would get him back to Santa Clara again, and begin anew the task of building him up into a steady-going reputable character.

Dick was terribly downcast at the turn which events

had taken. He blamed himself for not making some excuses and turning back when he first perceived how gloomy and depressed Meredith had become. "He has thrown himself back years!" his thoughts ran on the second day after they reached Midas Creek, when Meredith was sitting in a corner of the "house place," no longer a man, but a mere whiskey-consuming animal. His great frame seemed to have shrunk somewhat; his eyes, fixed on the fire or some part of the room where there were no people, were blood-shot and lack-lustre, his hands were shaky, and when he managed to reel from one place to another his knees visibly gave under his weight. He was a pitiable object, and Dick determined, as he found that they were strangely enough unknown to any of the people in the hotel, that he would, as far as possible, keep his identity a secret. His friend's name he had already mentioned to the landlord, who was comparatively a newcomer to the neighbourhood; his own he was careful not to tell.

Life in the Far West is very free and easy. Those who frequented the hotel kept as much as possible out of the way of Meredith, whom they regarded as a dangerous brute, too far gone in drink even to quarrel with. Some of them had no idea that the two were travelling together; others, with scarce more than a passing thought, wondered that a smart young fellow like Dick could trouble himself to try to keep such a brute straight. And Meredith, mind you, had degenerated into a mere brute. Those who had known him in his sober days would hardly have recognised the sodden, inert mass which he had now become.

So three or four days went by. Dick did not keep very closely to the hotel, but prospected the immediate neighbourhood—thus quite unwittingly giving an impression that he was thinking of buying land and establishing himself near by. In truth, Dick was so miserable that he kept as much out of the hotel as possible, in order that he might not see the degrading process which would, he hoped, eventually bring Meredith once more under his control and influence.

So four days had gone by. It happened on the evening of the fourth day that Dick returned from a prowl round the little town. He was met at the door by the landlord, who wore an anxious face.

"We've had a most awful time," he exclaimed. "Your friend has gone clean off his head. Oh, yes, completely. The fact is he came into the bar for another bottle of whiskey, and he had gone through the other so fast, and he came upon me so suddenly for it, that I hadn't time to doctor it. In fact, he took it off the shelf himself."

"And of course the raw spirit finished the business," said Dick, with a groan. "What are you going to do?"

"Do?" said the landlord. "Well, he is like a dangerous lunatic at present. We look to you to do something."

"I can't do anything," said Dick. "I am a mere thread-paper compared to him. Where is he?"

"Oh, he is up in that corner of the 'house place' by the window, jibbering like an ape, and muttering and talking to himself and hurling threats at somebody or other. I wish he was safe out of the place."

"So do I," said Dick. "He hasn't had a bout of

this kind for over two years. I suppose it's something in the atmosphere of the place that has started him on again. Anyway, there is nothing for it now but doing the best we can for him. I will go and see what he says to me; sometimes he will let me do as I like with him. Anyhow, this sort of thing cannot last long, because he never sleeps and he never eats, and of course his strength gets reduced very quickly. He will be all right when once he gets the turn, you know."

"I hope he will!" said the landlord; "I don't like having a wild beast in my place at all. I am not used to it."

Dick laughed. "You will have to get used to some very queer things if you stay out here long," he returned.

"Ay," said the landlord; "poverty makes us acquainted with strange bedfellows."

Dick turned round and looked at him. "You had a better position in the old country?"

"I had that same," said the landlord. "I needn't say that I don't carry the same name here that I did at home. I am doing well enough, I am able to make a living here, and a good one. I was a failure at it over there, but if my people could see me serving out whiskey to such fellows as that, well—I think those that are dead would turn in their graves, and those that are living would never get their hair to lie straight again."

"Ah, well, life's a queer riddle," said Dick, "and that poor chap in there has found it as queer a riddle as most people. He's a good sort at the bottom, when he hasn't got these drinking fits."

"Ah, me, that's the case with a good many men," said the landlord. "But I do wish you would go in and see what you can make of him."

Dick turned on his heel and went into the "house place." It was practically deserted, although in a very short time dinner would be spread on the long table which ran from end to end of it. In a huge armchair near the fireplace a man sat, half-asleep. He was a stranger, who had arrived a short time before by the coach, and had settled himself down to wait until dinner should be ready. At a table further on two men were playing cards, with pipes in their mouths, and each with a glass of rye whiskey at his elbow. In the corner, near to the "big window," as it was called, in contradistinction to two small windows on the opposite side of the room, sat Roger Meredith. He had turned his chair so that his back was towards the room, and the bottle of whiskey which he had seized from the landlord was standing on the table beside him. Standing? No, I should say lying in such a way as clearly showed that it was empty. His long legs were stretched out in front of him, his chin was sunk upon his breast, his glaring eyes were fixed on the window, and his helpless hands hung over the arms of his chair.

"Death!" he was saying, as Dick softly approached him. "Death! I will be even with him yet. I have owed him a grudge these nine years; I will pay it with interest. Psalm-singing devil! He thought to come over me with his Bible quotations. Roger Meredith ain't that sort. Roger Meredith

never forgets. Roger Meredith never forgives. Roger Meredith pays his debts. So I will pay this debt. Boy! Boy, more whiskey!"

The Chinese boy came running at the sound of his name. "More whiskley? Blingee d'lectly." He seized the bottle and ran away back to the bar.

Meredith went on muttering. "I know what it all meant. He wanted her—and that was at the bottom of it. He had seen her; he thought if I could get her out here that he'd get hold of her. The hound! So he offered to lend me the money; and now I've plenty of money—heaps of it—piles of it. I could run my fingers through it like a miser —I could let it fall like a shower of golden rain. Boy! More whiskey!"

At this moment Dick went forward and laid his hand upon Meredith's shoulder. "Old chap," he said, "don't have any more whiskey."

Meredith looked up. "Who the devil are you?" he asked with a ludicrous attempt at dignity. "What the deuce do you mean by interfering with me? Can't a gentleman—staying in an hotel—order what he likes? I—I resent your interference, sir."

"Meredith! Meredith! Roger!"

"Do you want to borrow money of me?" Meredith demanded. "Landlord! Landlord!"

The landlord came hastily across the "house place." "What is the matter now?" he asked.

"The matter is this—counterjumper is interfering with me. Put him out. Do you hear? Put him out. Send me some more whiskey."

Dick shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Am I to give him more whiskey?" said the landlord.

"Well, there's no keeping him off it till he gets to a certain point, and then it will cure itself, but for God's sake water it."

"Oh, I'll water it," said the landlord. "But you know the score is running up pretty much."

"Oh, I'll come into the bar and settle the score. I'll pay up to to-night, and then you can make me out a fresh bill in a day or two's time."

Thus authorised, the Chinese boy carried yet another bottle of rye whiskey, or what purported to be rye whiskey, to Roger Meredith.

"I don't think," said Dick to the landlord, "that he'll go on very much longer. When he gets to this stage of talking utter rot he always collapses a bit, and then he's in for a good howl and is amenable enough. If I could give him a strong opiate now I should be glad."

"Have you got anything with you?" said the landlord.

"No, I haven't. I suppose I could get something at the chemist's. Is there a chemist's store in the street?"

"Oh, yes, there's a chemist's store, and a very good one. There's almost anything."

"Then I'll go down and get a good dose of the stuff that I usually give him. Now, landlord, that settles both accounts right up to to-night—doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does that same, sir. Very much obliged to you. You see, when a man has such a vast

quantity of stuff he might repudiate it when he comes to."

"Oh, he wouldn't do that; he isn't that sort at all. Now I'll be off down the street."

He left the hotel, and went at a brisk pace down the steep village street—for although they called it a town, Midas Creek was no larger than we at home would call a village. About half-way down the street he came to the store of which the landlord had told him, and there purchased a generous sleeping draught. As he came hurriedly out of the store he cannoned against a man passing by.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," said Dick.

"Don't mention it, stranger!" said the other. "It was an accident. Am I going right for Rutter's Hotel?"

"Yes, I am going back there. We can go up together if you like."

"Why, certainly. I'll be glad of your company. It seems durned queer for the hotel to be a quarter of a mile from the cars."

"It is queer," said Dick. "However, there it is. I suppose Rutter took it as he found it."

"Is it a decent place?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, oddly enough, though I know this part of the country well, I have never been in Midas Creek before," said the stranger. "I've got a pretty important business to come about now that I have come."

"Have you?" said Dick. "Well, it's good to hear of important business. I always like to do so.

It isn't a bad little place, but, I must say, I would rather be farther up myself."

"Yes," said the stranger, "there's all sorts of temptations in a town that you don't get on the ranches."

"That's the hotel," said Dick, as they came in sight of the lights of Rutter's.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said the stranger. "It looks an English enough billet."

"Oh, it's English enough," said Dick. "He does it very well as an Englishman."

"Oh, yes, they do it very well in a small way, but if you want to run a big hotel, you must get a Yankee to do it; but for this sort of little home-by-the-wayside business, Britishers do well enough."

As they turned into the hotel, Dick piloted his new friend to the bar, where the landlord was generally to be found.

"Here's a new guest for you, landlord," he said, cheerily. He felt, somehow, with that comfortable sleeping draught in his pocket, that his troubles with Meredith were fast coming to a close; indeed, he little thought how fast.

The landlord came out of the bar and greeted the stranger with his usual cordial geniality, and showed him the door into the "house place." As he crossed the large room, the stranger turned with an astonished air to Dick.

"Why," said he, "that's Meredith! I haven't seen him for years and years and years. He's at his old game!"

"He's 'been on the drink for several days," said

Dick; "drinking—hard drinking; raw—except when the landlord doctored it."

"Ah! I shouldn't have thought that he would have lasted so long, though he had a constitution of iron. I've known him for years. He's a brute; an unmitigated brute. What a stroke of bad luck for a decent man like Rutter to have Meredith pitch upon his place as a likely spot for a booze. Yes, I call that a stroke of downright bad luck."

"It's bad luck for everybody where drink is concerned," said Dick. "The landlord makes out of drink, but he has had enough of it, and more than enough of it."

As the words left Dick's lips Meredith lunged out of his chair on to his feet, wheeled round, and saw the two men crossing the room together. As his eyes fell upon Dick his whole person seemed to be transformed; his face fairly lighted up with demoniacal rage. He was no longer shrunken and enfeebled, his splendid frame seemed to-be swollen with fury to even more than its normal size.

"Is it you?" he said. "Is it you? I've been looking for you these nine years. You devil! So you have come in my path at last!"

"Why, what on earth are you talking about?" asked Dick.

"What am I talking about? You dare to bandy words with me? I've prayed every time I thought of you, for nine years past, that you might be delivered up into my hands, and now—now I've got you, and there's no escape for you!"

"Don't talk rot!" said Dick.

"Rot? Is it rot? Yes—it's rot that you'll be presently. You've known all along that when I got you, when I once got my fingers on you, I'd shake the life out of you like a dog!"

He made a rush forward to seize Dick by the throat. Dick parried the blow and stepped quickly to one side. The next moment Meredith had whipped his revolver out of his hip pocket.

"Look out! He's got a six-shooter!" cried the Yankee.

Up went Dick's arm again in a vain attempt to knock the weapon out of Meredith's hand. The next moment the two men had closed together. Knowing Meredith as well as he did, Dick had a fair idea of what would be his method, and every moment he expected to feel the muzzle of the revolver against his temple. In a flash he made up his mind that he would sell his life dearly. If only he could knock the weapon out of Meredith's hand, he felt that he would not have the strength to continue the struggle very long.

But, heavens, how strong he was! He tried time and again to overthrow him, but although Meredith had drunk himself into a frenzy during the past few days, Dick had no more power to move him than he would have had to move the side of a house. The great muscles stood out upon his legs like knots of steel; the grip upon his right shoulder made Dick sick with pain. His left hand was all that he really had to defend himself with; and at last, when he felt his strength going, when he felt Meredith's hot breath upon his face, and then the touch of the cold

steel upon his left cheek, he flung up his arm in a last desperate effort to protect himself. There was a puff of smoke and the sharp crack of a pistol shot, a further onslaught from Meredith, and then, as a last hope, Dick contrived to wrench his right arm free, and get at his own revolver.

It was the work of a moment. A fresh rush from Meredith, the crack of Dick's revolver, a scream, and then the giant hands relaxed their hold, and Meredith tumbled to the ground with a sickening thud, and lay there absolutely motionless.

CHAPTER V.

GOOD ADVICE.

As Meredith fell to the floor, the hubbub of voices which had accompanied the struggle died away into silence.

"He's done for," said the landlord, kneeling down beside the huge prostrate form.

Dick Vincent stood by, his nerveless hands still holding his revolver, his face filled with horror and dismay. "You don't mean that he is—dead?" he burst out.

"I do; dead as a door-nail," answered the landlord.

"Did I do it?"

"Well, it got done. There's little blame attached to anyone."

"You don't think it was his revolver that went off?"

"We can soon settle that point," said the man who had walked up the street with Dick. "Let's have a look at your play-toy. Ah, one shot missing. Was it fully loaded?"

"Yes, it was."

There was no thought in Dick's mind of keeping any of the truth back.

"Let's look at Meredith's six-shooter, landlord," the stranger went on.

"Meredith was his name?" said the landlord, gently

disengaging the weapon from Meredith's nerveless fingers.

"Yes, Meredith. I've not seen him for years. Ah, you see! Only one shot. That was the shot he fired when you threw his arm up. Well, stranger, I am afraid you must put him down to your account. You have done many a worse deed in your life than putting that chap out of the road."

"I didn't wilfully put him out of the road," said Vincent. "It was his life or mine."

"I don't know you, sir, but I'll lay long odds that yours was the better life of the two. It couldn't be worse than his, anyhow. And whatever country you live in, there's one law that always holds good: when your life's threatened, sell it as dear as you can. The best thing you can do is to clear out."

"Oh, I can't do that," said Dick. "I must stay and see the inquiry through."

"Well," said the stranger, "I advise you to clear out. It will be the easiest way for you and for everybody concerned. You don't know anybody here, do you?"

"Not a soul!" said Dick.

"Then clear out."

While this conversation was going on the landlord, with the help of several men, was busy removing the inert mass that had once been Roger Meredith into an outer chamber. It was a room next to the stables that had been used for such a purpose before; in fact, they called it the "inquest room."

"I suppose he is really dead?" said one of the men, when they had lifted him on to the great table where accidents usually were deposited.

"Dead as a door-nail!" answered the landlord; "and there's no chance of getting a doctor to him either. Jericho has gone off to Barnes Drift—to attend to Barnes's wife. Not the slightest chance of getting at him under several hours. Besides, he is dead. Look at him."

The stranger who had foregathered with Dick came in just in time to hear the landlord's words.

"Well, I'm a doctor myself—at least, I was once," he remarked. "The man's dead enough, but if you have any doubt I'll make a regular examination."

"Yes, I think it would be as well," said the landlord. "We haven't a chance of getting Jericho here for some hours. It would be a satisfaction to the young gentleman that settled his business for him."

"It would be a satisfaction to everybody who has ever had the pleasure—or the misfortune—to come across Meredith," said the stranger, with uncompromising directness.

"Do you speak intimately of him?" said the landlord. "Did you know him well?"

"I have known him for years—at least, I knew him for years, a long time ago. I haven't seen him for many a long day; didn't want."

"Did he always drink?"

"Always. Always drunk, always quarrelsome, always getting the horrors badly. I've seen him kill two men when he was on the drink. He was a lucky chap, too. He always slipped out of everything. However, he's met his match at last, and a very good job for everybody concerned. If I were you, landlord, I should make as little fuss as I could. So far

as I ever knew, Meredith was a man without a friend. Never met anybody that didn't execrate him. He was a coward and a bully; an out-and-out blackguard that was a detriment to any part of the world that he happened to be in."

At this point Dick, who had followed the group of men, by a sort of natural instinct that he would not seem to be trying to sneak out of the responsibility of what he had done, opened his mouth to speak. The stranger stopped him.

"Now, listen to me!" he said. "I never saw you until to-day; I don't know your name, or where you come from; I don't want to know it."

"As a matter of fact, none of us know it," said the landlord.

"Then don't ask it. As for you, stranger, if you know anything about Meredith, keep it dark. The man's dead; he was killed in a fair fight—at least, he was killed in a fight that was obviously unfair to you, for you are half his size. Anyway, fair or unfair, the man's dead, and nothing will bring him back to life again. Take my advice, and clear out of this. You have nothing to gain by remaining; you have nothing to gain by facing it out. Don't tell your name, or where you have come from, or anything about yourself. Clear out!"

By this time the other men, who were well used to little accidents of the sort, had all trooped away out of the room, leaving the landlord, Dick and the stranger alone with the dead man. The announcement that he was a doctor, or, as he had put it, "by way of being a doctor," had helped to this end. In spite of

the fearful object lesson which they had helped to remove, every man of them felt in immediate need of a drink.

As the quick, decided words of advice left the stranger's lips, Dick stood irresolute, looking first upon the landlord, and then upon his new friend. "It isn't like me to turn my back on a danger," he said at last.

"Oh, turning your back on a danger—fiddle! It isn't that at all. There's nothing to be gained by facing it out."

"Look here!" said the landlord, taking him by the arm and drawing him away towards the door. "The last time a man was shot here the Sheriff swore that he would make an example of the next one. You are the next one. Do you want to be made an example of? If you make a bolt for it in the confusion of the moment—well, nobody can blame any of us. I like you; you squared up his drinks without a word, and they were heavy enough to make most people open their eyes and sit up. I'd like to see you out of this. Take my advice; take that lantern-jawed chap's advice. Git!"

The sound commonsense of this argument appealed to Dick with irresistible force. After all, he had committed no sin. The whole affair had been more or less an accident, entirely an accident so far as he had been concerned. It had been a question of his life or Meredith's. He had honestly done his best to keep Meredith straight—indeed, he had kept Meredith straight for years on end; but this time he had broken out beyond all power of any ordinary man

to control. And, after all, why, having killed the man, should he remain to be sacrificed, from a false sense of honour? If he were hanged or lynched twenty times over, that would not bring Meredith back to life again; and if nothing was to be gained by remaining, why should he not go?

"You really think I had better go?" he said, looking the man fair and square in the eyes.

"Yes, I really do. You have no very great amount of time to lose. I must send down for the Sheriff—I know he happens to be away, but I must send for him all the same—and the moment I have done so, I must forbid anybody to leave the house. There's a train," taking out his watch and looking at it, "in a quarter of an hour from now. Don't say a word to anybody. Take your bag, for that might lead to identification, and go."

"Thank you, landlord, I will. I see that you are perfectly right, and I am very much obliged to you."

He turned back to the stranger, who was standing looking down on Meredith's dead face. "Sir," he said, "I don't know your name any more than you know mine, but I am infinitely obliged to you for the advice you have given me."

"I am sure," said the stranger, "that it is the wisest course for you to take. Look here! I like you; I like your nice and generous English face. You will naturally feel some anxiety about the outcome of all this; here's my name and my home address. Write to me in a week's time, and I'll tell you how things have gone. I'll send you the local paper; there's sure to be an account in it. Then you can possess

your soul in peace, and know whether it is safe to come within a hundred miles of this or not."

"Thank you a dozen times," said Dick. "You are a good friend, if ever a man had one. Perhaps some day I may be able to repay the genuine friendship you have shown me to-day."

"Don't speak of it," said the stranger. "I am only too glad to have been able to do it. A man might be forgiven for not keeping his head cool under such circumstances as these. By the way, you needn't tell me your name when you write to me; it isn't in the least necessary. Call yourself Robert Martin; that name is as good a name as any other, and I can as easily write to Robert Martin at some post office as I can write to you in your own name and to your home, wherever it is."

Dick put out his hand and took the stranger's in a mighty grip. "God bless you!" he said. "You have done me a good turn, and you have done it in a gentlemanly way. I can't thank you any better than I have tried to do already. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said the stranger.

Then Dick Vincent turned to take a last farewell of the man who had been his comrade and chum for more than seven years. "Old fellow," he said, "I little thought ever to take a man's life, let alone yours. If you are up there, or anywhere about, you'll know that I didn't mean it." He bent down and touched the nerveless hand. "Good-bye, old chap," he whispered, "good-bye!"

Then, without another word, he turned and went quickly to his room in search of the small bag which

was all that he had taken to the hotel with him. It merely contained a change of clothing and his necessary toilet requisites. Clothes were not so plentiful at Santa Clara as to be worth carrying about from place to place.

Meredith's second coat and waistcoat were lying on his bed. As quick as thought Dick Vincent caught up the waistcoat and thrust his hand into the inner pocket. As he expected, in his unhinged state of mind, Meredith, in changing his clothes, had forgotten to transfer the portrait of his wife from one pocket to the other. The little case was there, and Dick thrust it into his own breast pocket. Then he glanced round the room to see that there was nothing of his that he had left behind. No, not a thing; all that there was belonged to Meredith.

He opened the door quietly, looked out and saw that the coast was clear, ran down the stairs, and passing the door of the "house place" on tiptoe, he noiselessly left the house and plunged into the fast gathering gloom of evening. He glanced at his watch as he passed the first light in the street. Ten minutes to catch the train; ample time, provided that nobody came to stop him. He swung steadily along, down the narrow, irregular street, past the different stores with their flaring lights, round the corner, up the narrow dark lane, and under the rough portico of the railway depôt.

A ticket for the next station was soon taken; he had thought it out while coming down the road, and if enquiries were made for him it would be just as well not to leave behind evidence that he was going

straight for New York. He saw with satisfaction as he passed on to the miserable and ill-lighted platform that there were a good many passengers of about his own age and appearance.

Then a bright thought struck him. He slipped into his great travelling ulster, turned up the collar, pulled his cap well over his eyes, and went back to the ticket office. There he took a ticket for New York. He felt sure that the clerk had not recognised him as the man who had taken a ticket for the next station a few minutes previously.

Then the train came majestically in, some passengers alighted, and the waiting ones boarded the cars, the whistle sounded, and Dick Vincent had begun the second stage of his flight.

CHAPTER VI.

WAITING.

At first when Dick Vincent found himself speeding away as fast as the cars could take him from Midas Creek, his only feeling was one of regret that he had not stayed behind to face out what he had done.

"Hang it all!" his thoughts ran, "this is coward's work—to run away. I never turned my back on a scrape in my life; in fact, my scrapes up to now have been few and far between. It is true I shot the poor dear old fellow, but he wasn't himself at the time, and if I hadn't shot him, he would have shot me. Then, perhaps, he would have run amok and taken half-a-dozen other lives. I had to do it. I'd far rather have faced it out. I hate this fugitive kind of business, and it will look awfully bad, and will go hard against me if they take the trouble to trace me out and follow me up. I've a good mind to go back. Yes, I'll get off at the next stopping-place, and I'll take the first train back again."

In this frame of mind he travelled for some miles. Then a coloured gentleman came round and informed him that supper was ready. Dick thought he might as well have supper, because under any circumstances it was no use going without food, and he had, of course, had no supper at the hotel. The exhaustion

and excitement through which he had passed, and the awful revulsion of feeling which had overcome him on finding that he had taken the life of his greatest friend, had all combined to produce in him a most frantic hunger. So he made his way to the dining car, and put away as good a supper as any man ever sat down to; and when supper was over and he went off for a smoke, his thoughts naturally reverted to his scheme for getting back again to Midas Creek.

"It seems rather a tomfool thing to do when I've got clear away, and they do not know my name or anything about me," commonsense said to him.

"It seems a very cowardly thing to make a bolt of it, as if you were a murderer," said his sense of honour.

"Go back and see the last of poor old Roger," said sentiment.

And so his thoughts ran—"Pull devil, pull baker" —until at last commonsense put an everyday suggestion into his mind.

"It shall be tails I go back, heads I go forward!" he said to himself.

So Dick pulled a coin out of his pocket—a gold coin, for luck—and spun it deftly up, as high as the height of the car would permit. He held it a moment between his palms, before looking to see how it had fallen, and so meet his fate. "But whatever it comes, I'll abide by it," he said. Then he opened his hand and looked at the coin as it lay shining in the palm of his left hand.

It was heads!

So he must go forward. He had promised himself

that he would abide by the throw of the coin. Chance, blind chance, had told him to go forward, not to turn back. A thought came to him of how Lot's wife had suffered by turning back in the hour of danger. And then a few lines of a poem came into his head, for, let me tell you, it was not very easy to get books of any kind at Santa Clara, and many and many a winter's night Dick had conned over a little collection of thumb-marked and worn books of poetry: —

"Let not him that putteth his hand to the plough look backwards;
Though the ploughshare cut through the flowers of life to its fountains.
Though it pass o'er the graves of the dead and the hearths of the living.
It is the will of the Lord; and His mercy endureth for ever!"

Well, he had put his hand to the plough, and it was no use looking back. Practically it had already passed over the "graves of the dead," and it would rest with him whether, in the future, it would pass over the "hearths of the living."

He was very sad, very dejected, as the train whirled him away from difficulty and danger into safety. Self-preservation is the first instinct of humanity, but now that the excitement was over, now that he had nothing to do but think over the events of that eventful day, his thoughts were all sad. Poor old Roger! Good friend and chum; nobody's enemy but his own. How hard he had tried to keep him straight. How full of hope he had been, when they set out together from Santa Clara, that he would succeed in his mission; that he would find the long-

neglected wife, and that she would come back with him to enjoy the good times that had set in for the owners of the Californian ranche.

Well, that dream was over and shattered for ever. Poor old Roger was lying in that outer room at the hotel at Midas Creek, his splendid strength brought to an end by the hand of his own friend. Not maliciously, they all held him free of blame, Dick thought wretchedly. "After all," he mused, "if I hadn't done what I did, I should be lying in that outer room instead of him. Life is 'Every man for himself'—it must be so—and if poor old Roger knows, he will hold me as free of blame as those that were looking on."

And yet—his friend was gone. The partnership had come to an end, a sad, miserable, wretched end, to which he had never looked. The unexpected always happens, and he had certainly never expected such an end as this. In this life it is the one who stays behind who thinks the most. It is always so. The lover who goes away to the other side of the world is more likely to forget the girl he leaves behind than the girl, who merely continues her ordinary daily round, rendered more blank by the absence of the loved one, is likely to forget him.

So in the case of Dick Vincent. He passed day after day in the luxurious cars, sleeping, dining, reading, smoking, talking, and with every hour that went by the horror of the scene through which he had passed at Midas Creek seemed to fade away. He was not callous, far from it; but he was being taken swiftly and easily away into fresh scenes, and the

change of life and movement round about him all tended to blot out from his mind the first vivid impression of Roger Meredith's tragic death.

So by the time he reached New York he had made up his mind that it was no use fretting over what was done and could not be undone. It was no use regarding himself as a murderer, or even as a fugitive. If the worst came to the worst, he had taken the advice of those who had seen the whole affray from beginning to end, and doubtless, if necessary, they would back him up to the extent of owning that he had acted by their advice.

He determined to remain a few days in New York so as to communicate with his unknown friend at Midas Creek. Therefore, as soon as he got settled down in his hotel, he wrote a letter to the friendly stranger. It was a manly letter, telling him that he had more than half repented turning his back on the scrape in which he had found himself. He told him how he had reasoned things out with himself, and how, finally, he had tossed for guidance as to the best line of conduct. Then he thanked him for having so completely stood his friend, and begged him to send him the result of the inquest to a certain post office in New York. He signed the letter, "Robert Martin."

"I feel rather mean," his thoughts ran, "but it was the chap's own suggestion, after all, and he seemed to have a long head on him. So I daresay he was perfectly right in his suggestion that it is no use exposing my own name."

When his letter was safely deposited in the post

office, Dick Vincent felt happier. He knew that from Valentine Clegg—for such was the stranger's name—he would obtain authentic information as to the last details concerning poor Meredith. But he must patiently await a reply, and, as all the world knows, a letter cannot go from New York to California and the reply cover the same distance without a wearisome wait of many days.

I am bound to say that the two weeks which followed Dick Vincent's arrival in New York was the most wearisome period that he had ever passed in the whole of his life. He did everything to occupy himself that a stranger in the land could do. He visited the theatres and other places of amusement, he went the round of the best restaurants and feasted royally, like a king, but all the same, it was a miserable hangdog existence. He began to understand how it is that men give themselves up to justice years after they have committed a murder. He began to go over the scene again; he began to fidget and worry as to whether, if he had done just the opposite of what he had done, he would have exercised a different influence over Roger Meredith. He began to blame himself. He could not sleep at nights for visions of Roger Meredith which visited him. He was all right during the day time, he could occupy himself; he could keep that worrying brain of his quiet by giving it plenty of other things to think about; but when it came to the lonely watches of the night, it was another matter altogether. He took to going to the large public reading rooms, and there he industriously looked over hundreds of newspapers, but

without finding any one from the district around Midas Creek which ever mentioned the affair. He became haggard and wan and weary.

And so the slow days dragged their interminable course along, until at last he received, on application at the post office, a letter addressed to "Robert Martin." He took it from the clerk with fingers which trembled in spite of his nerve and resolution. He didn't open it until he had seated himself in the restaurant where he was going to eat his lunch; then, having given his order for the meal, he at last ventured to open the letter.

"Dear Robert Martin," it began, "I was very pleased to hear from you, and to find by chance I had strengthened my opinion that it was perfectly useless for you to remain here. Meredith was buried in the little cemetery at the back of the chapel in Midas Creek. A good many people turned out to give him a last salute, but the manner of his death has not interested many people, as he was absolutely unknown to everybody but myself, and I had nothing good to say about him. I privately saw some of the jury, and also said a word or two to the coroner, with the result that you will not even be inquired for.

"I hope that you will not allow this wretched affair to weigh on your mind, or in any way overshadow your life. You looked to me young, straight and honest, and it would indeed be a thousand pities if your life were in any way spoiled for a worthless blackguard such as I well knew Mere-

dith to be. Take my advice, and for the future force yourself to think of the affair as a pure accident, which in truth it was.

"I am sending you by this mail a newspaper giving an account of the inquest. I can add that the verdict gave universal satisfaction. The ways of juries are very wonderful in all parts of the world—at least, that has been my experience, and I have lived in almost all countries.

"With every good wish, believe me, cordially yours,

"VALENTINE CLEGG."

It was with a certain feeling of dismay that Dick Vincent realised that he must go back to the post office and find out whether there was a newspaper waiting for him. Perhaps it had come by a later mail.

He finished his lunch, drank his black coffee, and smoked a cigarette before he allowed himself to think about going back to the post office. Even then, although he had spun the time out, the clerk told him that there was no other communication for him. So he must put off yet another day; he must get through another evening and another night. However, he filled in that afternoon by making enquiries about his passage for Liverpool, and buying some few necessaries that he would require for the voyage. Then he dined and went off to a theatre, and after that he looked in at another restaurant for some supper, going to bed at last so dogged tired that for the first time since he had reached New York he slept a sound, dreamless sleep until late in the morning.

He went twice to the post office before he received the paper of which Valentine Clegg had spoken. It was then late in the afternoon, very near to dinner time, and as he walked slowly down the street he tore off the wrapper, being too impatient to wait until he reached the restaurant where he went to dine.

Yes, here it was, a full account of the affray, but so garbled in the telling that he, although the principal actor in the scene, could hardly recognise it. It described how Meredith was an irredeemable blackguard, well-known to persons staying in the hotel, who had drunk himself into a state of delirium, in spite of everything that could be done to stop and even doctor his supply of whiskey. Then it went on to say that on the afternoon in question he had made a murderous attack upon a young man resident in the hotel; that in endeavouring to save his own life Meredith had been accidentally shot, and that in the opinion of all the onlookers there was not the slightest blame to be attached to anybody but the unfortunate man himself.

The account then went on to relate that the jury had unanimously agreed on the verdict of "Death by the visitation of God," and that, when mildly remonstrated with by the coroner, had firmly expressed their desire that the verdict should stand. "The man was delirious," the foreman of the jury explained, "and an unintentional shot put an end to his existence before he had time to murder the object of his fury or other persons. We consider his career was cut short by the visitation of God." "Gentlemen, it is for you to give what verdict you think best," was the

reply of the coroner. And Dick Vincent, as he folded the newspaper and thrust it into his pocket, mentally echoed the words of Valentine Clegg: "Truly the ways of juries are very wonderful."

So the chapter had come to an end. He was safe. Nobody who knew his name would connect him in any way with the tragic end of Roger Meredith. He was free to go on board the great liner which would sail the following day. But before doing so, he felt that a very unpleasant duty lay before him; he must write to Santa Clara and apprise the manager, Jack Frogg, that Roger Meredith was dead. He must tell him how, when, and why he died, only suppressing that one little fact, that he had died by the hand of his greatest friend.

CHAPTER VII.

HOME AGAIN.

EVEN after what he had learned from Valentine Clegg's letter and from the little journal which circulated news in and around the neighbourhood of Midas Creek, Dick Vincent did not feel himself perfectly free to leave New York and take the great steamer which would land him once more on his native shores. In the first place he felt that he must write to Jack Frogg, whom he and Roger Meredith had left in charge of affairs at Santa Clara.

The letter was easy enough to write. He told the manager that he had just received news from an acquaintance of his in Midas Creek that Roger Meredith had come to an untimely end. "He was, as you know, very moody and gloomy before we left home; and his depression seemed to increase until we got to Midas Creek, from whence I took the cars. I could not induce him to go any further on the journey. He seems to have drunk hard from that time. Eventually he completely lost his head, and drew his revolver on those who tried to restrain him, with the result than in the scrimmage he was shot dead. I send you herewith a paper which gives an account of the inquest. I am fearfully cut up about the whole business, but as I have got this far, and every arrangement has been made for my going home

for a few months, I do not see that I should do any good by coming back before the time originally intended. Let me have a wire as soon as you receive this, to say I can leave everything safely with you. I shall remain here until I hear from you."

When the letter and the newspaper were safely despatched, Dick felt more easy in his mind, and he set himself down to wait with what patience he could the arrival of Frogg's telegram confirming the arrangement that he had made with him. He also at the same time took steps to provide himself with other copies of the Midas Creek "Free Press," but these he directed to be sent to an address in England.

It was a weary time of waiting, but Dick Vincent was an indomitable young man, who never swerved from a path on which he had once set his feet. Having taken up the burden of a secret, he determined to carry out any work which it might entail to the very end—the bitter end if need be; and as communication with Frogg necessitated a few more wearisome days to be spent in New York, he set himself to endure them. But as all things, good and bad alike, come to an end in time, so did the time of Dick's weary waiting come to an end also, and he one morning received over the telegraph wires a message direct from Jack Frogg.

"Grieved at news," it said, "and will do my level best during your absence. You know you can trust me. Let me have English address."

It was as Frogg had said; Dick knew that he could trust him. He was a rough, untutored man, but

honest as the day. Dick recalled with a sigh how poor Roger had said as much when they first proposed leaving the ranche in charge of Frogg during their absence. "And poor old Roger knew them when he saw 'em," was Dick's final thought. "I'd back Roger's judgment in the matter of a phiz before anybody I ever knew in my life. Dear old chap! He had a good opinion of Jack, and Jack's a good fellow all round. I'd trust him with untold gold."

He therefore wrote again to Frogg, telling him that he was going to start the next day for England; and he gave him his address at his father's house. In concluding the second letter he said:

> "I may as well tell you that I am going to England partly on business connected with Mr. Meredith. He placed some money in my hands with instructions as to its disposition in England, and I should like to carry out his wishes before I go into the question of his property and share of Santa Clara. Mr. Meredith made his will just before we left Santa Clara; it is in safe keeping at Freeman's Rock. The final disposition of his property will depend upon what I arrange in England."

He added one or two more instructions as to certain favourite animals on the ranche, and then closed the letter feeling that he was really free at last. And the following day Dick went on board the great steamer which would take him home.

With the details of the voyage we have nothing to do. With every mile that the great steamer carried

Dick Vincent away from the New World to the Old, so did the tragedy of Roger Meredith's death fade into the insignificance of a mere incident. Every day Dick felt more and more that he had been but an instrument of Fate; that poor Roger had to come to his end, and that he personally was not in any way responsible for what had happened. He regretted him as keenly as ever; for, mind you, the two men had loved one another with a great and abiding affection, such as neither men nor women often know.

At times it made him feel sick and cold to think that when he returned to Santa Clara there would be no Roger Meredith. But, on the whole, as the days went by he thought about him less and less, and he accepted the inevitable as inevitable. So by the time the shores of his native land came into view he had ceased to have any haunting feeling about the fatal shot which had brought Meredith's turbulent life to an end. And there was no reason why he should have thought otherwise. He well knew that if Roger could come back he would be the last person on earth to blame him in the smallest degree. There was no reason then, why, once the first shock was over, he should continue to blame himself.

It was in this eminently comfortable frame of mind that Dick Vincent once more found himself in his native country. It was all very delightful to him; the smooth and easy life which a man who is not short of money can enjoy in old England was pleasant and soothing to him.

From Liverpool he went to London—where he stayed long enough only to pay a visit to his tailor's

and to lay in a stock of accessories to the masculine toilet. Then he went off, without further delay, to the old manor house where he had been born.

How pleasant it was to find himself once more in the old Kentish home which he had not seen for seven years! There was so much to do, so many people to see; early in the morning to walk round the place, when the cheery old squire had tight hold of his arm, while he pointed out this little improvement and that little innovation; then to go through the hothouses, round the stables, to speak a word to each man and woman on the estate who had been there before he went away; then to go down the village with his handsome sisters to pay a special visit to his old nurse, married long years now, but with ever a tender spot in her heart for the boy who was the pride of the Vincent family and the joy of every man, woman and child connected with the Vincent estate. Then he had to ride over to Foxborough, where his eldest sister, who had during his absence been married to a neighbouring squire, lived and had two or three olive branches, who bid fair to be as handsome as herself. Dick had stood godfather to one of these, a young Dick—a sturdy fellow who rode about the gardens on the back of a huge St. Bernard, tumbled off half-a-dozen times a day, picked himself up, rubbed the place, and swore that he wasn't hurt. You know the kind of child—just such a boy as Dick had been two-and-twenty years before. Then there were long talks with his mother, and visits to pay all over the neighbourhood; and then Dick carried off his two sisters to town with him, and as

they were joined on all occasions by the fiancé of the elder one, they made a nice little "partie carrée."

After a gay week in town, during which Dick spent his mornings at his tailor's, and began, in his own words, "to feel and look like a gentleman once more," he went back to the old Kentish home again, and there found awaiting him the copies of the Midas Creek "Free Press," which he had ordered before he left New York. The sight of the limp little newspaper served to bring him back with a jerk once more to a realisation of the duty that lay before him.

His letters had been taken into his mother's own sitting-room, which had always gone by the name of the "Red Parlour."

"There are ever so many letters for you, Dick," she said, as the four young people tripped into the room, for Winifred's young man had slipped away from his briefs and come down to Hollingridge for the week-end. "But don't read them now," she said, putting up a warning hand, "because tea will be here in a minute, and cook has made you an immense pile of pikelets. You must eat them while they are hot, or I am sure she will break her heart."

"My dear mother," said Dick, "in this country one does not fly at letters as one does on a Californian ranche. There one would let pikelets, or muffins, or foie gras, or an omelet, or anything else in the eating line go to perdition for the sake of a letter. Here one feels quite different; and my distinguished correspondence can wait most comfortably until I have demolished cook's pikelets."

Winifred's young man looked up in alarm. "Are you not going to let us have any?"

"I don't know," said Dick. "If you are quick—perhaps. But you have been having pikelets on and off all the time I have been doing my own cooking on a Californian ranche."

"Dick, did you do all the cooking?" asked Laura.

"No, not all the cooking; we turned and turned about."

"Week in, week out?" asked Winifred.

"No, not week in, week out. It depended on what we had to cook and on what work had to be done. Some things I could cook and Meredith couldn't; some things he excelled in that I was a duffer at. And it was the same with work; and between the two we made it fit."

"And never quarrelled?"

"I never quarrelled with Meredith," said Dick, rather shortly.

"Never in seven years?" put in George Drummond.

"Never in seven years. I never had a wrong word with the dear old chap in my life, from first to last."

And then his heart gave a great sick throb as he remembered the last scene, when Roger Meredith's drink-maddened eyes had glared into his with murder in them.

He sat in his chair and took a cup of tea from his mother's hand, stirring it round and round to the utter neglect of the tempting pile of cook's pikelets which reposed on a little table just in front of him.

"What is the matter, Dick?" said Laura in an undertone.

"Nothing."

"You don't look as if nothing were the matter," she persisted.

"Don't I? I hate to think about Meredith; that's all."

"You liked him very much?"

"Yes, I think I did more than like him; I am sure I did. He was such a good sort. If it hadn't been for drink, Meredith could have gone anywhere, done anything, filled any place. I tried so hard to keep him from it, and to think he could come to an end like that—in a drunken brawl! Ah, I cannot bear to think about it."

"I wouldn't think about it if I were you," said Laura, speaking in a rapid undertone, for the others were all talking nineteen to the dozen, "I wouldn't think about it, Dick, if I were you. It wasn't as if you could help it."

"No, it wasn't as if I could help it, was it?"

"Of course not. And if men do take to drink, it really is their own fault."

"Yes, I suppose it was his own fault, poor old chap. I can't bear to think about him."

"I wouldn't think about him if I were you, Dick," she said tenderly, "that I wouldn't."

All the same, it is one thing to make up your mind that you will follow a certain course, and it is another thing to follow it.

"Have another pikelet, Dick?" said his mother, handing him the plate.

"Not another, thanks, mater."

"Oh, do, dear, or cook will be so upset if she thinks

you do not like them. She will be sure to think there is something wrong with the pikelets. You always used to be so fond of them."

"Yes, I know, but I don't feel like eating to-day. Oh, well, here—I'll take one," he said, impatiently.

He took another of the little rich cakes and choked it down with an evident effort. "George," he said, handing him the dish, "here! You have got a maw like a shark. Get ready, and have a dozen of these, there's a good old chap."

"So strange," said Mrs. Vincent to Laura, when the others had strolled away, "I never knew Dick refuse pikelets in my life before! And he seemed so hungry when he came in; he wouldn't even open his letters—and they are not opened now. I wonder if he doesn't feel well. Have you been overdoing it in London?"

"Not a bit of it, mother. Something recalled Mr. Meredith to his mind, and it knocked him over completely. I don't think you half realise how fond Dick was of him."

"No, I daresay not. But still, the poor man is dead and gone, and, after all, he came to a most disreputable end, and it's no use Dick brooding over it. He couldn't help it, poor boy, and pikelets always were——"

"Oh, mother, don't worry about it. After all, it's a very little time ago, and it must have been a dreadful shock to Dick. Hasn't he opened his letters?"

"No, he hasn't."

"Oh, well, I wouldn't bother him with them. Dear

old Dick! I hate to think of him being down in the mouth and miserable."

"So do I," said her mother. "And it isn't as if he had come home for good. I suppose he's going back to that horrid ranche, where he never gets anything to eat that is fit to eat. It does seem hard that he can't enjoy good things while he has the chance of them."

"Don't worry, mother," said Laura, "don't worry. Leave Dick to get over it and live his own life."

"But he's never even opened his letters!" said Mrs. Vincent, vexedly.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SPELL OF FAMILY LIFE.

"I WISH," said Mrs. Vincent, half-an-hour later, when Dick had lounged into the "Red Parlour" again, "I wish you wouldn't let your mind dwell on that poor fellow, Dick."

"What poor fellow?" said Dick.

"The poor fellow that was killed," said Mrs. Vincent.

"Oh, you mean Meredith? Well, mother, I can't help thinking about him sometimes, and when anything reminds me of him, I can't help getting a fit of the blues. It's all right. I shall get over it after a bit. Don't worry about it."

"I can't help worrying, my dear boy, when I see you miserable, and you don't eat, and all those good pikelets wasted."

"No, not wasted, for Drummond had a thundering good feed of them."

"Yes, I know. But George comes continually; and George is never out of the road of English cooking. I don't put myself out about George, I can assure you."

"I daresay not. But cook won't know whether George or I ate this particular lot of pikelets."

"You never opened your letters," Mrs. Vincent went on.

"By Jove! No more I did. Really, mother, I beg your pardon. You must forgive me this once."

"Forgive you? Dear boy, you have come home to enjoy yourself. All that I am anxious for is that you shall have a really good time. It isn't a question of forgiveness. How ridiculous! Well, here are your letters. I'm sure I do hope there won't be anything disagreeable in them."

"Not at all likely," said Dick, easily.

There was indeed a goodly batch of correspondence —bills, letters, invitations, and communications on business pure and simple—but Dick at last got through them all, and there was only a bundle of newspapers to be opened. This bundle contained the copies of the Midas Creek "Free Press." He tore off the wrapper with a sick throb at his heart; he had already seen a copy of the paper. "Here, mother," he said, when he had turned to the place where he knew the paragraph would be, "there's the account of poor old Roger's death. It was a hideous business."

Mrs. Vincent took the paper from his hand with a feeling of vexation in her inmost soul, just glanced over the paragraph, and put the paper down on the table beside her. "My dear Dick," she said, "if a man could drink like that, drink himself mad, I really don't think he could be much loss to anybody. And after you had kept him straight for years, to be tempted the moment you turned your back——"

"Well, mother," said Dick, "we never know, any of us, what we may do until we are tempted. Poor old Roger had been as straight as a die for over two years. Don't let yourself think of him as a be-

sotted beast that had no good in him. He was the kindest, gentlest, best fellow that ever lived. He took me up when I was a mere tenderfoot—a youngster—and he stuck to me through thick and thin right down to the very last. I believe it was only the fact of my coming away that made him take to the drink at all."

"Then why did you go away, Dick?"

"Well, for one thing I had made every arrangement; I wanted to come home. I thought you wanted to see me."

"Of course, we did."

"I begged him to come."

"Why didn't he come?"

"Well, mother, I can tell you, but keep it to yourself until I have found out all there is to know. Meredith was married."

"Married? Where was his wife?"

"That's what we don't know. He didn't know; he wanted me to find out whether she was alive or not; whether there was any chance of her coming out to him."

"He was fond of her then?"

"Oh, yes; always had been. It was only the demon of drink that ever seems to have caused them any trouble at all."

"But that needn't have prevented his coming to England."

"Well, it needn't; I did my best to persuade him. The truth was he had got it into his head that she might have married again; and if she had he didn't want to have her disturbed. He knew he had been

a failure as her husband, and if she had found another he would have stood aside in silence and remained in America all the rest of his life."

"There was nobility in him," said Mrs. Vincent.

"Nobility in him!" echoed Jack. "I couldn't make you or anybody else understand, unless they had known him, that in spite of the drink Meredith was all nobility. I don't believe I shall find her married; I believe if he had lived she would have gone out there and been as happy as a queen for the rest of the chapter. It's partly that that makes me so sad when I think about it all. But there—I didn't come home to worry you, mother; I won't talk about it again."

"And you want to discover her?"

"I've got to discover her," said Dick. "I've got a large sum of money to hand over to her; and now, if I can find her or the child alive, the half of the ranche will belong to them."

"And if you don't find them?"

If I don't find them, that is if I find absolute proof of their death, it will all belong to me."

"He left a will?"

"Yes, he made a will. He made it himself, only a few days before we left Santa Clara. Of course, I shall find them—I've got to find them, alive or dead."

"But you won't go away just yet?" said his mother, anxiously.

"No, not just yet."

"How will you know where to find them?"

"Oh, well, I know where Meredith left them."

"How long ago is that?"

"Some fifteen or sixteen years."

"Oh, my dear boy, anything may have happened. Has he never written to her?"

"I believe not. He left his wife, confident of making a fortune; he never had a shade of luck until he met me. At first, as you know, we had only the luck of being able to keep body and soul together. I was able to get help from the governor; Meredith had no governor. Indeed, right down to now he never felt that he could write to her as he would like to do. So when I proposed to come home for a holiday he asked me to find her—to institute enquiries, you understand."

"And to take her back with you?" said Mrs. Vincent.

"That was his hope, poor old chap. Can't you understand, mother, that I don't like even to think about it?"

In her way Mrs. Vincent was a very wise woman. From that moment she worried her son with no more strictures on the life and character of his chum, Roger Meredith. More than that, she spoke to her youngest daughter on the subject.

"If I were you, Laura, she said, "I wouldn't speak to Dick about that unfortunate man, Meredith, at all. He has taken his death very much to heart indeed. There seems to have been a great deal of good in him, poor fellow. I'm quite sorry for Dick. He'll get over it after a time, but for the present don't encourage him either to talk about him or think about him. He told me a good deal about it the other day. I quite understand Dick feeling a little morbid on the

subject. Poor fellow, it's very sad, just when they were getting into smooth water, that things should have gone so wrong. I feel very much for Dick in the whole affair. And Dick was proud of him and kept him straight. It's always the same with drunkards—heart-breaking work trying to reclaim them. I feel most sorry for Dick, and if we can do anything to prevent him from even thinking about the unfortunate man again, it will be quite the wisest course we can take."

"Poor dear Dick! Oh, I won't say a word, mother," the girl replied. "I saw from the beginning, of course, that he was brooding very much over the whole affair, and quite enough to make him. It's a horrible thing to see your friend murdered before your very eyes."

"My dear, Dick didn't see it. Dick was in New York."

"Oh, was he? I thought he saw it. How do you know?"

"Well, Dick showed me the paper. It is here; it gives an account of the whole thing. Curious people they are out there. Actually brought it in—'Died by the visitation of God.' Blasphemous, I call it."

"Ah, I suppose," rejoined Laura, "that it was their way of saying that there was no blame attached to anybody. But as you say, mother, they are queer people."

"Juries, my dear, are queer all the world over. One never knows what a jury may or may not do, I'm sure. There was the case of that poor Edward Brown. They found him in the first spinney at the Three-

Mile-Bottom with his head literally battered in, and the jury brought it in—'Found dead.'"

"Oh, he was killed by poachers."

"Ah, but would you imagine," cried Mrs. Vincent, "that respectable jurymen are intimate with poachers?"

"It looked rather like it," said Laura, with a laugh. "However, perhaps they'll put women on juries one of these days, and perhaps then we shall get something approaching to commonsense and justice."

"Oh, my dear, my dear, pray don't allow any such horrible ideas to dwell in your mind for an instant. I hope the day will be far distant when women have any more power than they have now; married women have all the power they want."

"And the unmarried women?" cried Laura, with a laugh.

"The unmarried women? Oh, it doesn't matter what becomes of them. All the nice women get married."

"You had better not tell Aunt Charlotte so," said Laura, with an irrepressible giggle.

"Aunt Charlotte?" Mrs. Vincent looked up in a startled kind of way. "Well, rich maiden aunts—oh, of course, yes—they form a sort of class by themselves, don't they, dear? That is rather different. But you will remember what I say about poor Dick?"

"Oh, I'll remember, mother. I am as sorry for poor old Dick as you are. And from what he says Roger Meredith must have been a good sort, with just that one little weakness to ruin him."

But in spite of Mrs. Vincent's precautions that no-

thing should be said to remind Dick of his lost chum, Dick did not recover his natural spirits. Truth to tell, the pilgrimage which he must make in search of Roger Meredith's wife and child had come to weigh upon his spirits like a lump of lead, or a bad dream. Of course, he knew that there was no getting off the quest, that he would have to go, he would have to use every endeavour to find the woman who for fifteen years had been utterly neglected by the man who all the time was pining to see her again.

In a way he understood Meredith's action. He understood how he had left home in a blaze of triumph and prophecy that in a new world he would easily carve out a new career which should be the means of providing for her and the child as lavishly as the most loving husband could desire. But things had gone wrong; and day after day went by until Meredith's hope had fled, and he had not liked to write; he had been ashamed to write and admit his failure. Then, after fifteen years had passed, it was naturally most difficult to break the long silence. He quite understood, if it were so difficult for him, what it must have been for Meredith himself—practically impossible.

However, he had accepted the trust, and he must carry it through. It was a sacred trust—the last request of a dead and gone friend. Yes, he must make up his mind to leave the pleasant Kentish home, the handsome mother and sisters, the cheery father, and the people round about, all keenly interested in the doings of the much-longed-for son and heir to the old place. Yes, he must leave them. He must go

down to Blankhampton, and he must set his wits to work to find some trace of Roger Meredith's wife—for when Roger Meredith had crossed the seas in search of a career in the New World, his wife had gone down to Blankhampton, desiring, for some curious motive best known to herself, to cast her lines among strangers.

"Of course," Meredith had said to her the night before he left England, "of course you will go back and live among your own people?"

"No," she said, "I think not. I will write to you in a short time. You had better leave me free; I shall do better if I am not hampered in any way."

Then, after a few weeks, the news had reached him that she had settled herself at Blankhampton.

"I don't know one soul in the place," she wrote to him. "I have enough money, with what you gave me, to establish myself, and although my poor little pittance is not enough to keep us on, yet I am certain that here I shall get some sort of work. I feel convinced that the way will be made open to me. I like Blankhampton very much. It is quiet and dull, except you are in the Cathedral set or the Army set, but the tone of the place is good; it has an air of sedateness and dignity about it which just now to me is very comforting. I shall very contentedly stay here, dearest Roger, until you send for me."

Was she, Dick wondered, still waiting the summons or had she grown tired? He could not tell which course was the most likely one for her to have taken; whether she was still on the alert listening for the postman's knock, whether she had dropped by the

wayside, or whether she had formed new ties, new interests, a new life. He had written down in his pocket-book the last address from which Meredith had heard from her. He did not know Blankhampton, he had never been there, so that he had not the slightest inkling whether the address was a good or a bad one. It was a very curious-sounding street—"Mrs. Roger Meredith, 19, Ogledal, Blankhampton." Ogledal! What an extraordinary name for a street! It must be a street, for the number of the house was nineteen. Well, he would go down to Blankhampton, and he would search round the street called Ogledal, and he would prosecute enquiries.

But day after day went by and still Dick Vincent did not leave Hollingridge, until at last one evening, when he was sitting alone smoking on the western side of the house, it suddenly came upon him like a flash of light that he was grossly neglecting his best friend's last request; that it was not sufficient to say to himself that he would set about Meredith's business some day. Some day was no day; and Dick Vincent shook himself out of the atmosphere of doubt and indecision in which he had been lingering for many days, and told himself that he would set off on his quest on the morrow.

CHAPTER IX.

A RESOLVE.

"GOING away to-morrow?" said Mrs. Vincent, in a tone of dismay. "Oh, well, I suppose we could not expect to keep you here all the time."

She was sitting at the head of the dinner table; Dick was beside her. She leaned her elbows upon the table and looked at him with her handsome eyes full of regret.

"It isn't that, mother. I would rather stay here altogether, until I have to go back to Santa Clara," Dick replied. "But I have got some very important business to carry through."

"Oh, have you? Connected with Santa Clara?"

"Well, it is and it isn't. It's private business of Meredith's, poor old chap—for it's the last thing he asked of me. I didn't see about it before, because, to tell you the truth, I didn't feel equal to it; but the time is going on now, and the sooner I see it through the better."

"Then you'll come back here when you're through?"

"Oh, yes, mother, of course I shall." Then Dick laughed a little laugh. "In a place like Santa Clara, mother, it isn't so lively or so comfortable that a man neglects a home like this to go gadding about, dining at restaurants and visiting theatres."

"Dear boy!" said Mrs. Vincent, laying her hand affectionately upon his arm.

"So as soon as I am through I shall come back again. I must stay a day or two in town, just to see after a few things I want to take out with me. I should like to get them ordered in time."

"And Dick, you'll not be seven years before you come back again?"

"Oh, no, mother. I shall come back every year now, unless very unforeseen things should happen. You see, I didn't want to come back a pauper, and the governor had lent me a good bit of money, so I didn't feel justified until we really began to make. But now there is not likely to be any lack of money, although it is quite true I may not make millions. But I shall never stay seven years again, especially," he added, "without poor old Roger."

"You will take another partner?" asked his father from the other end of the table.

"I don't think so. It isn't likely I shall meet another man I feel just the same to as I did to Meredith. And a partnership is a very close business; it is nearly as close as getting married."

Mrs. Vincent rose in her place at that moment. "Come, girls," she said, "let us go into the drawing-room."

So Dick and his father were left alone together, but the conversation did not happen to be about Santa Clara. Mrs. Vincent reverted to the subject, however, when Dick joined them later in the drawing-room.

"I suppose," she said, in an undertone, as Dick settled himself down on the sofa by her side, a very

favourite corner of his, "I suppose you are going to look up Mr. Meredith's wife?"

"I am going to try and find her, mother. I am afraid," he added penitently, "that I have neglected it too long."

"Oh, well, dear, it can make very little difference to her, poor soul, after all these years of waiting. And it was really necessary that you should relax yourself a little after your long strain."

"Well, it's not a pleasant task, anyhow. But still, I must go through with it."

"You won't be away longer than you can help?"

"No, no; I don't want to go at all."

"Dear boy!" said Mrs. Vincent in her most caressing tones.

So the following day Dick Vincent set off. He did not go straight to Blankhampton, but stayed the rest of the day and night in London; and the day after that, by a moderately early train, he continued his journey, and in due course of time—otherwise about five hours—he found himself in the well-known cathedral city.

He turned his back upon the gaudy Station Hotel, and enquired of the cabman which was the most comfortable hotel in the city itself. The Jehu, who was ancient and well steeped in the traditions of Blankhampton, told him that at the Golden Swan he would find excellent accommodation for both man and beast.

"Well, you see, I haven't got a beast," said Dick, "but the Golden Swan will do me very well. Drive me there."

And to the Golden Swan he was driven. He thought St. Thomas's Street, in which it lay, seemed rather narrow and antiquated; he did not realise then that in its narrowness lay its chief charm. He found the Golden Swan an old-fashioned hostelry, where he was given a warm welcome and conducted to a large sleeping apartment, the furniture of which was very old and solid. The hangings were very white and spotless, and the room, like the rest of the hotel, had an indescribable air of long-established solidity.

"Will you take anything, sir?" asked the chambermaid, as she stood watching the porter of the hotel unstrap Dick's portmanteau.

"Yes, I will have a whiskey and soda when I come downstairs."

"Will you dine here to-night, sir?"

"Yes. I suppose there's a table d'hôte?"

"Yes, sir, there's dinner at seven to half-past."

"Very good. Tell them to keep a place for me."

It was then nearly six o'clock in the evening. He washed his hands and brushed off the dusty effects of the journey. Then he went downstairs and had a whiskey and soda. After that, he lighted a cigarette and stood on the steps of the hotel watching the rank and fashion of Blankhampton go up and down the street. He had heard before that Blankhampton was famous for its pretty girls, but he had not been prepared for the panorama of beauty which spread itself out that evening before his astonished eyes. They came past in twos and threes, and each one seemed to be prettier than the last.

"Gad! this is the place to come to," he said to himself.

He was a singularly uninflammable man; had he not been so he would certainly never have stayed seven years at Santa Clara with no more than an occasional jaunt down to the western towns, in which beautiful women did not as a rule flourish.

"Now I come to think of it," his thoughts ran, "St. Aubyn used to say what a jolly billet Blankhampton was. And I remember he raved about the girls. It seems to me that it has kept up its tradition; these girls are extraordinarily good-looking."

Then he looked back into the hotel. "What regiment is quartered here now?" he asked of the barmaid, who was to be found behind a huge glass screen opposite to the door.

"The Black Horse," the girl replied.

"The Black Horse? You don't say so! By Jove!"

"You seem pretty much astonished," said the girl.

"Well, I am. It was my old regiment."

"Really?"

"Yes. I must go and call to-morrow."

Then he turned back and took up his position on the step once more. He did not, however, stay there very long, for just as he was lighting a fresh cigarette, a girl came along the street whose beauty so far outshone all others who had gone before her that Dick was, figuratively speaking, knocked all of a heap. She was very plainly and simply dressed, and she was quite alone. For a moment Dick stood glaring blankly after her, the match still in his hand. It was

not, indeed, until the flame reached his fingers that he realised how completely he had been astounded and dumbfounded by this vision of beauty. Then, as quick as thought, he descended the steps and gave chase up the street. The girl herself was so unconscious of his presence that Dick instinctively was all carefulness not to attract her attention, but he had a good satisfying stare at her; noted the simple grey coat and skirt, white sailor hat bound with white ribbon, the neat grey gloves, and firm light footstep. She was evidently out on business of some kind, for she went into several shops and came out of them, and set off down the street carrying some small parcels and a library book under her arm. He followed her no further than the end of the street; she was not the kind of girl that a man follows for very long. Then he retraced his steps to the hotel, and once more interviewed the pretty barmaid.

"Is there a street in Blankhampton called Ogledal?"

"Oh, yes," she replied.

"Is it far from here?"

"Well, you go right up to the top of the street, and then you come to a street which goes straight down to the cathedral. You turn to the right when you get to the bottom of the street, and go round the cathedral to the right, and it's the third street you come to leading out of the parish precincts."

"Oh, I see; thank you very much. What sort of a street is it?"

"Oh, a queer little old-fashioned street with a double turning in it."

"What sort of people live there?"

"Well, like all the old streets in Blankhampton," the girl replied, "there are some big houses and some little pokey houses. Some of the best people live in houses that lead out of Ogledal."

"Oh, I see; thank you very much." And Dick turned on his heel and was soon swinging away up the street at a good rapid pace.

He found the cathedral easily enough, and by following exactly the directions that had been given to him soon saw the curious name of Ogledal put up on a board at the end of a narrow street. So this was where Roger's wife had found a shelter.

It was a queer street. At the end at which he entered it there was to the right a low, old-fashioned house such as you never find except in the neighbourhood of a cathedral; on the other was a long garden wall. Then another wall on either side, evidently the boundary of private gardens; then a wide old entrance into a great square, with a splendid house, almost like the houses you see in the older parts of French towns, and half-a-dozen small houses on either side. Then a curious house with "St. Giles's Rectory" written on the door-plate; then another wretched entrance into a court. Then half-a-dozen commonplace houses, and opposite some kind of manufactory—or rather some kind of works; then a brewer's yard and several tall chimneys; then some cottages. This was on the right side of the street. As he walked on the left, with its commonplace modern houses, he came to two semi-mansions. They were respectively numbers twenty-three and

twenty-one. So he was close upon number nineteen.

Number nineteen was a small, old-fashioned house, with a window full of plants, a framed plate of fashions, and a sheet of blue glass in a gilt frame, on which was written in letters of gold—"Miss Beazley, Dress and Mantle Maker." Dick stood still for a moment looking at the fuchsias and geraniums, at the simpering fashion plate, and the blue glass with its gilt letters.

"Miss Beazley," he muttered. "Well, she might know something. I may as well ask."

Then he stepped to the door and rapped half-a-dozen times with the little tin-pot knocker. At first there was no response. He waited a few minutes, and then knocked again. Then there was a scuffling and a scurrying of feet within, and the door was opened by a snub-nosed girl of about fourteen or fifteen years old.

"Does Mrs. Meredith live here?" inquired Dick.

The girl looked up in a scared kind of way at the tall soldierly young man. "Mrs. Meredith? No, I don't know that name," she said. "Miss Beazley lives here."

"Yes, I see she does by the plate in the window. Has she lived here long?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I have not been with her very long."

"Is Miss Beazley at home?"

"No, sir, she isn't at home. She's out."

"Oh! When will she be at home?"

"Well, she might be home about nine to-night. She's gone up to Water Muggleston to fit on a lady."

"To fit on a lady? Oh! You think she'll be at home about nine?"

"Yes, I'm sure she'll be at home about nine, because the train gets in at twenty-five minutes before nine."

"I see. If I came back at nine you think she would see me?"

"Oh, yes, she'd see you."

"Or could I see her in the morning? Nine o'clock is rather late to answer enquiries."

"Yes, I daresay you could see her in the morning."

"Will she be at home at ten o'clock, do you think?"

"Oh, yes, I should think she'd be at home at ten o'clock."

At this juncture another voice, proceeding from the dim recesses of the little house, spoke to the girl. "What does the gentleman want, Mary Ann?"

"He wants Miss Beazley."

"Well, Miss Beazley is out. Is there anything I can do?"

The voice came nearer and nearer, and then a stout elderly person, wiping a pair of wet hands upon a not too clean apron, came round the corner and into view. "I am Miss Beazley's mother," she said to Dick Vincent. "May I ask what you want of her?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," answered Dick, "I don't know anything of Miss Beazley at all. I want a Mrs. Meredith who lived here in this house about fifteen years ago. I suppose you haven't been here as long as that?"

"Mrs. Meredith? Would you please to walk in, sir? Come into the parlour."

So Dick strolled in and stood, looking very tall indeed, in the little parlour with its wax flowers and its crochet antimacassars.

"Thank you very much. I'm afraid I'm troubling you, but the fact is I want to see Mrs. Meredith on most important business, and with as little delay as possible. If you can give me any information about her I should be most grateful to you."

"No, I can't," said Mrs. Beazley, still wiping her hands and gazing reflectively through the screen of plants out into the street. "I can't. We've been here three years come Michaelmas; and before us there was a Mr. Johnson used to live here. He was a naturalist; he used to—you know, sir, a naturalist—stuff birds, and blow eggs, and mount butterflies and things of that kind. He was here for a many years."

"Oh! And where is he?"

"Well, Mr. Johnson, he's dead," said the old lady. "Mrs. Johnson, his wife, likewise she's dead."

"Can't get any information out of them," said Dick.

"No, that you can't—not in this world, at least. But they had a married daughter, and she used to live in Briergate. She was married to a very clever young fellow that sang in the parish choir. He sang alto; and then his voice cracked and he got a place as organist out in the country somewhere, and took pupils. Now she would know, if Mrs. Meredith lodged with her father and mother, she would know all about her."

"But where does she live?" asked Dick.

"Ah, now, that's slipped my memory. But when

my daughter comes home—she's got a better memory than I have, and she keeps going with people more; I think young people do. So if you could make it convenient to call round to-morrow, sometime when my daughter would be likely to be in—and that will be all the morning—I daresay she could give you the information you want."

"I am sure," said Dick, "I am much obliged to you. If I were to come in between ten and eleven, would that suit Miss Beazley, should you think?"

"Well, sir, I should think it would. I've not heard of anything particular that she's got to do at that time. I know she's a lady coming to be fitted at twelve."

"Well, I'll come before eleven," said Dick, "and I'm extremely obliged to you."

"I haven't done nothing for you yet, sir," said Mrs. Beazley, following him to the door.

"Well, you have shown willing," said Dick, taking off his hat with a flourish.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST LINK IN THE CHAIN.

BETWEEN a very excellent dinner and the feeling that he was on the high road to the discovery of Mrs. Meredith, and the fact that he had seen the most beautiful girl that day that he had ever seen in his life, Dick Vincent passed the evening in a very much happier frame of mind than he had imagined he could possibly be in when he left London that morning.

He was up betimes—for life in California does not tend to the formation of habits of laziness. He had a regular Blankhampton breakfast too—and let me tell you that Blankhampton hotels are famous for their good cheer, especially in the earliest meal of the day—and then about half-past ten, feeling very well fortified for carrying on his quest, he sauntered up the street, and once more knocked at the door of number nineteen, Ogledal.

The little maid was ready, and answered his knock promptly. "Yes, sir, Miss Beazley is in. Step this way, please, sir."

Once more Dick found himself in the little parlour, and almost immediately the old lady whom he had seen the previous evening came beaming in.

"Good morning! I knew my daughter would know," she remarked. "She has such a much better memory than I have. I can remember anything as

happened when I was a little girl, but when you ask me about last week I'm done. Here she is. Now, honey, this is the gentleman."

"My name is Vincent," said Dick, with a very polite bow to the young dressmaker.

She was a pale, slim girl some three or four-and-twenty, and she addressed herself directly to the visitor. "You wanted to know about Mr. Johnson's daughter—married daughter?"

"Well, I did and I didn't. Your mother was kind enough to tell me last night that she thought the lady would be able to give me the information I require. I am really looking for a Mrs. Meredith—who lived in this house fifteen years ago. Whether she rented the house, or whether she lodged in it I have not the least idea."

"Oh, she must have lodged in it," said Miss Beazley. "because the Johnsons lived here for about five-and-twenty years, and we took it of them—at least, we took it after they left."

"Oh, I see. Then you think she must have lodged with the Johnsons?"

"I think she must have done. I don't know anything about it myself, but I'm sure Mrs. Johnson's daughter would know. She married a gentleman called Pilkington. He was in the choir at the parish; in fact, he lodged with the Johnsons."

"Oh, I see. And do you happen to know where they live now?"

"Yes. His voice broke, and he got a place as organist at Bensehill, and he teaches music and so on. I think they do very well."

"And where is Bensehill?"

"Well, Bensehill is about three miles from Blankhampton."

"How does one get there? You see, I am quite a stranger to this neighourhood."

"Oh, it's easy enough to get there. You can take a cab, or you can walk," smiling at him, "or you can go by train."

"Oh, I see. I can go by train. That would be the quickest, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. It's on the Rockferry line, and trains are pretty frequent. Anybody in Bensehill will, of course, tell you where the Pilkingtons live."

"Oh, yes. Well, Miss Beazley, I must thank you, and your mother too, very much indeed for your kindness to a perfect stranger. You perhaps would like to know why I am so anxious to find Mrs. Meredith. The truth is I have just come from California, and some relatives of hers there—at least, a relative of hers there—asked me to find her out if I could. So you see, I am anxious to find her as quickly as possible."

"Well, I'm sure," said Miss Beazley, "if anybody can tell you anything about her it will be Mrs. Pilkington."

"And to Mrs. Pilkington I will go by the first train that will convey me. So good morning, and thank you both a thousand times."

The old lady stood on the doorstep and watched him go swinging away up the street. "That's a handsome young feller, Jenny," she said. "He's got the same look as the officers have—so clean and so smart. Well, I'm sure I hope he'll find his Mrs. Meredith."

"So do I," said her daughter. "And I hope he's brought good news to her, whoever she is."

"Hey dear," with a sigh, "it's a hard and weary world."

"Lor', mother, I wish we had a smart young man coming and inquiring for us."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Beazley, "there's no knowing what fate won't do for you; but I'm afraid, though you're so genteel, Jenny, with yer nice pale face and yer slim figure, that if any smart young men came after you, and they saw your poor old mother, it would sort of give 'em the cold shivers."

"Go along with you, mother," said Miss Beazley.

Meantime Dick had gone briskly up the street, across the cathedral precincts, and down St. Thomas's Street to the Golden Swan. A fresh enquiry of the buxom barmaid elicited the fact that there was a train to Benschill at five minutes to twelve. He determined to go by that. He filled in the time until the train was due by taking a brisk walk round the city walls, and walked into the station with just time to buy a newspaper and take his ticket.

He found Benschill the usual little roadside station, with a pompous little station master and one antiquated porter.

"How far is the village from here?" he inquired of the latter as he took his ticket.

"The village? Three-quarters of a mile," was the reply.

"Can you tell me whether a Mr. Pilkington lives in the village?"

"Oh, yes. Mr. Pilkington, he lives in the village, to

be sure. Plays the music on Sunday, and teaches in the week-day."

"Yes, that's the man," said Dick, cheerfully.

"Yes, he lives—well, I doubt if I could make you understand, sir. You'd better ask at the Post Office. You'll find that right in the centre of the village."

"All right; thank you very much. Good morning."

So Dick left the station with its oyster shells and its glowing red geraniums behind him, and swung steadily away in the direction of the village. The Post Office was easy enough to find. The postmistress was a garrulous old lady, who at once proceeded to give him the proper directions for reaching the Pilkingtons' house, and also as much of the Pilkington history as she could cram into the two or three minutes that Dick remained in the little shop.

"Ah, yes, sir, a clever man—what I may say a genius; thrown away on this little village, I must confess, although I have lived in Bensehill all my life—a clever man and a genius. We've brilliant services on Sundays; we never had before Mr. Pilkington came. The rector, he said to me time and again, 'Miss Jenkins,' said he, 'you can play the piano, why can't you play the organ?' Which, as I told the rector more than once, it isn't an organ but a harmonium. 'Then,' said he, 'the easier for you to play; because it's the nearest approach to a piano.' But it's one thing playing the piano for your own pleasure and your friends' amusement, and it's quite another thing playing in public and for the service of the Almighty."

"That's perfectly true!" said Dick. "But still, if one does one's best, you know."

"Ah, yes, yes; that was the argument the others used—particularly the rector. And then by some merciful chance, as far as I was concerned, Mr. Pilkington came along. A first-class musician! Been years in the parish choir—the parish, that is the cathedral, you know, sir, at Blankhampton. Something had happened to his voice; I don't know what, but he and his wife wanted a country place where the air would be pure, and where he could play the organ and pick up a living in the neighbourhood. Oh, they had a trifle. Mrs. Pilkington was a Miss Johnson. Her father was a very clever man—not to say a learned man—and she was an only child. Oh, she has a nice little tidy income of her own, and you know a tidy little income makes people independent."

"I'm sure it does. They showed their good sense in coming here," said Dick. "And which is the way to their house?"

"Well, you go down this lane here, and you take the second turning to the right, and you'll find the house—like a little bower it is now, all smothered in roses. Mrs. Pilkington is a very ladylike little person, quite genteel."

"I see," said Dick, "down the lane, and second turning to the right?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Is there a name on the house?"

"Well, there isn't a name on the house that I ever saw myself, and their letters are simply addressed 'Dead Man's Lane' or just Bensehill; but there are

only three houses in that part of the lane, and the Pilkingtons' house has a mulberry tree right in the middle of the lawn."

"I shall find it," said Dick. "Thank you a thousand times."

"Nice pleasant-spoken gentleman. I wonder if he's an old lover of Mrs. Pilkington's come back again?" said the romantic old postmistress.

So Dick went down the lane and took the second turning to the right, speedily coming into sight of a small rose-wreathed house which boasted of a mulberry tree in the middle of the little lawn which skirted the road. Here he stopped, satisfied himself that it was the house, thrust open the little gate, and strolled up the gravelled pathway to the rose-covered porch.

A little maidservant came to the door in answer to his summons.

"Does Mrs. Pilkington live here?" asked Dick.

"Mrs. Pilkington she do live here," was the reply.

"Would you give her this card and ask her if she would see me for a few minutes on business?" said Dick.

He had been so long in California, and before that his life had run in channels well away from suburban London, that it never occurred to him that had he been living in Clapton or East Croydon, it was the last message he would have sent in to the unknown mistress of a house. Bensehill was also, presumably, too far removed from the beaten track of ladies and gentlemen who pay visits of a business kind to take fright at his message. The little maid left him standing at the door, and then came running back saying

with an eager gasp that "Mistress would be pleased if you would walk into the parlour."

So into the parlour Dick walked. It was a neat little room, a shade more refined than the similar apartment in the house of Mrs. Beazley. In one corner there stood a piano; some blooming plants and some nice green ones stood in the window. There was a broad couch covered with immaculately clean chintz, and one or two illustrated papers on the table. Dick decided in his own mind that Mr. or Mrs. Pilkington, or both of them, must be distinctly superior in class to Mrs. Pilkington's original status. He had just arrived at this conclusion when the door opened and Mrs. Pilkington came into the room. In her hand she held his card.

"You wanted to see me?" she said.

"I wanted to ask you a question," he replied. "Did you ever know a Mrs. Meredith?"

She looked at him with an air of surprise. "Yes, I did."

"Is she living?"

"I believe she is."

"Is she married again?"

"Oh, no, certainly not. She never had any proof of her husband's death."

"Can you give me her address?"

"I think I can."

"I don't want it for any unpleasant purpose—indeed, rather the contrary," said Dick. "I shall at least have the pleasure of bringing the mystery of her husband's long silence to an end."

"You knew him?"

"I knew him very well. We lived together for seven years."

"In America?"

"In California. We were partners. I never knew until quite recently that Mr. Meredith was married. I am looking for his wife on his behalf."

"Then," said Mrs. Pilkington, "I will give you her address. You will find her at Gatehouses."

"Gatehouses? Where is that?"

"It is a village about a mile and a half from Blankhampton. Anybody in the town will tell you in which direction."

"I thank you very much," said Dick. She lives there?"

"Yes, she has lived there for some years. Her daughter is the mistress of the infant school."

"Oh, I see. Her daughter is not married then?"

"No, she is not married. She is young."

"Yes, she must be young from what Meredith told me," said Dick. "Well, Mrs. Pilkington," holding out his hand, "I am extremely obliged to you—more than I can say. I expected to have much more trouble in finding my old friend's wife, and you have made the way very easy for me. Good-bye. Thank you again."

So he was soon striding away down the lane again.

He found when he got to the Post Office that he would have to wait an hour and a half for the next train back to Blankhampton, so instead of going straight back to the station, there to cool his heels until the train should arrive, he went across the street to the village inn and asked the apple-cheeked landlady what she could do for him in the way of lunch.

CHAPTER XI.

GATEHOUSES.

WHEN Dick Vincent found himself once more at Blankhampton, he lost no time enquiring the road to Gatehouses; in fact, he got into a cab at the station and told the man to drive him to Gatehouses. It was then nearly three o'clock.

"How far is it? A mile and a half?"

"Thereabouts, sir."

To Dick it seemed a very short mile and a half; but then, although he was determined to find Mrs. Meredith, he was not at all anxious for the interview to begin. "Find out," said he to the cabman, when they approached the village, "where Mrs. Meredith lives."

"All right, sir."

The house of Mrs. Meredith was not difficult to find, and before Dick knew where he was the cabman had drawn up at its door.

"You had better wait for me," he said. He felt somehow as if he would not want to walk back into the city again.

He knocked at the door. It was opened by a lady whom he at once recognised as the original of the portrait which Meredith had shown him.

"Are you Mrs. Meredith?" said Dick, taking off his hat.

"Yes, I am." Her tone was one of slight surprise.

"May I come in?"

"Oh, certainly."

"My name is Vincent—Richard Vincent. I have just come from California."

Mrs. Meredith, who had preceded him into the dainty little sitting-room, turned with a start and a gasp. "You have come from—him?" she said, sharply.

"Yes," said Dick, simply, "I have."

"After all these years—after all these years!" said the little woman with a sob in her breath. "And he hasn't forgotten me!"

"He had never forgotten you," said Dick, "although he had not spoken of you until the other day to his best friend."

"That was you?" she said.

Dick's nervous face relaxed into a half smile. "Yes," he said. "For seven years Meredith and I were partners. We lived together; we were everything to each other."

"And he spoke of me at last. Sit down, Mr. Vincent. Tell me everything," she entreated in a shaking voice. "This has come upon me very suddenly. I had begun to think that he had forgotten me perhaps, and that he had formed new ties."

"Never!" said Dick, "never! I never knew him look at a woman. It was a revelation to me when he told me of your existence, when he showed me your picture."

"My picture?"

"Which he had carried about with him all these years, and of which I never suspected the existence. I'd better begin at the beginning, Mrs. Meredith; it

will make it easier. Meredith went out there to seek his fortune."

"Yes, yes."

"He sought, God knows, poor chap, he sought it earnestly enough, but he didn't find it. He had left you in a cock-a-hoop sort of way, prophesying that in a few months there would be a palace ready to receive you. There has never been a palace, Mrs. Meredith. There is a corrugated iron hut on the ranche—which is called Santa Clara—but it is no palace."

"It would have been a palace to me," said Mrs. Meredith, in a broken voice.

"Well," Dick went on, "he took it to heart. He was ashamed to write and own up that he had been a failure out there as he had been a failure over here. And he drank more than was good for him."

"My poor Roger! It was his one failing."

"Yes, he was his own enemy," said Dick. "So he went on, year after year, and at the end of eight years he had only managed to scrape together, just at the end of that time, a poor little capital, that wouldn't have been of much good to anyone unless pure chance had come in and turned it into luck. Then we met. I had been in a cavalry regiment—my father is a squire down in Kent—my lungs were dickey, the doctors told me if I didn't get into a certain kind of climate I shouldn't live through a second winter. They recommended California, and I was never an idle beggar, and so I left home and went to try a ranche. I was young, I was green. I met your husband. He took a fancy to me, and I

took a fancy to him. I put my bit of capital together with his less bit of capital and his experience, and we threw in our lot together. It's very hard work is ranching, Mrs. Meredith, it's a process of disillusionment; and we only kept body and soul together. I had help once or twice from home, and at last we turned the corner, and we began to think that one day our ranche might be worth having—as a ranche, you understand."

"Yes, yes," eagerly. "Go on."

"Well, that year we made a profit. It wasn't much—any farmer at home would have turned up his nose at it. We didn't; and next year we made a better profit; and at the end of last year, when we had put six years of hard work into our ranche all the year round—work, mind you, not just riding about neatly togged up and giving an order here and an eye there, but hard, laborious, manual, back-breaking labour—then Fortune smiled upon us. We discovered oil on our ranche—or the oil discovered the ranche, I should say, for it bubbled up one morning, a stink of paraffin, and Meredith knew that our fortunes were made. I don't say that the ranche is worth millions, but at the end of that year we had ten thousand pounds to divide between us."

"And then he thought of me?"

"Then, Mrs. Meredith, I determined to come home. I had been out seven years, I hadn't seen any of my own people, and the way was perfectly clear for one or both of us to come home for a spell. I begged Meredith to come back and stay with my people, and then he told me about you."

The little woman shut her eyes and leaned her head back against the chair in which she was sitting. "He hadn't forgotten me," she said.

"No, he hadn't forgotten you. But I couldn't get him to come back."

"But why not?"

"I think," said Dick, hesitatingly, "that he felt a certain amount of reluctance—or at least, not exactly reluctance, Mrs. Meredith, but a sense that he had no right to come home to claim you. You see, he had been away fifteen years; he hadn't written to you for the greater part of that time, and it was more than possible that you might have married again."

"I?" she cried. "Oh, surely Roger knew me better than that."

"Well, he alternated between hopes and fears. He felt somehow that you would be as he left you, and yet again that you might have been tempted into marrying once more."

"And if I had?"

"If you had, I was to find out if you were happy. He had no wish to be a second Enoch Arden, making things unpleasant after so long a silence. If you had married again—and you were quite young enough to have married many times over—he would have stayed on the other side of the Atlantic for ever."

"But you see I am not married again," said Mrs. Meredith, looking at him with a triumphant smile. "I am a little older, but then so is he. I have not altered towards him in the very least, and evidently by what you tell me neither has he."

"He is older," said Dick. He felt that he was

getting very near to a disclosure. His heart beat to suffocation. He did not like to look at her. "He is older, Mrs. Meredith. You see, he has lived a hard wild life out there; not wild in the way of women, but wild in the way of having no refinements, no comforts. From time to time he drank pretty hard."

"But the life hasn't told upon you, Mr. Vincent," she said, deliberately.

"No, not much. But then I was only three-and-twenty when I was out there; Roger was over forty."

He thought that she would notice he spoke in the past tense, but she did not do so.

"Then again," he went on, finding that she did not take the cue from him as he had intended, "I have always been a very temperate man; drink was never a temptation to me. Drink leaves its mark on a man; it left its mark upon him. Not as it would have done if he had been a steady sort, and it was not as apparent to others as it seemed to me. When he began to think of the possibility of your seeing him again——"

"Then he did think of the possibility?"

"He did. He talked it over with me several times."

"He wanted me?" said the little woman, eagerly.

"He always wanted you," said Dick.

"Then, Mr. Vincent, since my husband is now on the high road to wealth, there is no reason why I shouldn't sell up my things here and go out to California to join him. I can easily raise the money for the cost of our journey."

"So far as that goes, Mrs. Meredith," said Dick, "there's no need for you to think twice about the

money. I told you that Roger and I had a sum of ten thousand pounds to divide between us. His half he paid over into a bank for transmission to England in my name; I have come over here empowered to hand it to you—that is to say if I found you under circumstances in which I could; if you were not married again."

"Roger—my husband sent me five thousand pounds?"

"He sent you five thousand pounds. I've not got the papers on me, because I don't think it quite safe to carry them about with me; but I can pay it over into your—into any bank you like, in a few hours."

"I shall certainly go out to—what is the place called?"

"It is called Santa Clara."

"Santa Clara? My name is Clara," she said.

"Yes, it was called so after you."

"I shall certainly go out," said Mrs. Meredith. "Oh, my dear sir," she burst out, "how am I ever to thank you for the trouble you have taken in finding me out, in coming so delicately to break the news of my great joy? Do you think—you have been so good, I can safely ask you a question I wouldn't put to many others—do you think I shall find myself welcome at Santa Clara?"

"Meredith lived on the hope of your coming out to him," said Dick.

Again he spoke in the past tense; again Mrs. Meredith failed to note the fact. By this time Dick began to feel himself in desperate straits. Here was this little woman, and a right pretty little woman she

was, too, ready for any scheme which would result in taking her back to the man who had basely—no, not basely, but deliberately deserted her.

Dick Vincent had not had a very wide experience of women, but he was quite certain that if his own father had abandoned his mother to fifteen years of absolute silence, and had shown himself at the end of that time, his mother would have had none of him. He felt that he might say the same of either of his sisters. This little woman seemed to feel nothing except that she was at one end of a journey and Roger was at the other; that the sooner she could make the two ends meet the better. He had to break it to her somehow or other; that it was no use her going out to Santa Clara, that the money had come too late, that there was no Meredith at the other end of the journey.

"My daughter," Mrs. Meredith said, breaking in upon his thoughts—"I have a daughter, you know; she is eighteen—nearly nineteen, in fact; she will be in presently. I am perfectly certain that she will be as eager as I am to go out and begin an entirely new life in a new country. We have been very happy here; I think we have the respect of everybody in Gatehouses. We visit at the vicarage; we are quite, in a modest way, in society; but when you have only about three pounds a week, and you have to keep up a decent appearance on that, it is very poor fun being in a kind of society. It's a narrow life—a pinching life. I don't say that we haven't been happy together, because my girl is everything that the most exacting mother could desire; good as gold, and unselfish to a

degree. She doesn't remember her father; she will be so glad to find him—almost, I think, as glad as I am."

"Mrs. Meredith," said Dick, "I haven't quite told you everything."

"But you have told me enough," she rejoined, "more than enough to make me eager and anxious to go out and see my husband in his own home, in the home that he has put together, he and you, with years of hard, almost unrewarded toil."

"You wouldn't like it," said Dick. "Santa Clara is no place for a lady."

His conscience smote him as the words passed his lips, for he remembered how persistently he had buoyed up Roger Meredith with his pictures of the difference that a lady would make to Santa Clara.

"Oh, I should like it," she exclaimed. "So would my girl. You mustn't misunderstand my life here, we are not like two women who have lived in the lap of luxury. And by all accounts Roger will have plenty of money now from this oil well of yours, so that the place, even if it is rather rough, can be improved and made more like a home. I am not a useless fine lady, Mr. Vincent. I can do anything. I can cook, I can carpenter, I can house-paint, I can do anything."

"I didn't quite mean that," said Dick. "There's money enough and to spare now, but you think it's a wild, free, happy, joyous, devil-may-care sort of life out there. It isn't. It's very sordid; it's hard work all the time; even at the best—even with an oil well. There's nothing romantic about California; it's the grave of all hopes!"

CHAPTER XII.

TOLD AT LAST.

As Dick uttered the words, "It's the grave of all hopes," Mrs. Meredith looked at him fixedly.

"The grave of all hopes!" she repeated. "Why, what do you mean? I don't say that some of my hopes have not been buried there these fifteen years, it wouldn't be true if I did; but they are not all buried, Mr. Vincent. Roger is there; Roger has 'struck ile'; Roger has sent home a fortune. Don't say that it's the grave of all hopes."

"I do say it," said Dick. "I know that we shan't want money in the future, whatever else we may want."

"You are keeping something back from me. Is —you don't want me to take this journey?"

"I don't!" he said candidly.

"Why not? Didn't you tell me Roger wanted me?"

"I did."

"Mr. Vincent, did he come with you after all? Is he in England? Is he in—Blankhampton? Is he in that cab that is waiting at the door?"

"No, Mrs. Meredith, Roger is not in England. Roger is not in California."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't quite know how to tell you," he said, very gravely.

"To tell me? What? Not that Roger is dead?"

"I am afraid I can't tell you anything else."

"Dead!" She repeated the word like one stunned. "After all these years to find him only to lose him again in the same moment. Oh, oh, how hard life is! When did he die? Tell me about it. Don't leave out a single detail; tell me everything."

"Well, I'll begin at the beginning. As I told you, Roger was most anxious that I should trace you out; that I should find you, alive or dead. If alive, that I should pay over the five thousand pounds of which I told you. I have told you that on his part he cared as much as he had ever done, but that a sense of shame held him back from coming to seek you out himself. He loved you all these years, but was not sure that he would find a welcome now. I assured him to the contrary——"

"Oh, you good fellow!" she cried, stretching out her hand.

Dick took the hand and held it within his own. "I assured him. One look at your face was enough when he showed me that portrait of you. I knew that you wouldn't have changed; you are not the kind of woman that ever changes. I couldn't convince him; I couldn't persuade him to come home and stay with my people while I made enquiries. And at last I came without him. He saw me part of the way down; he was very moody, very unlike himself from the time that we left Santa Clara. I thought that he was upset with the anxiety of not knowing whether you would be the same or not—and I believe that I was right.

"But when we got down to Freeman's Rock he began drinking. I did everything I could to stop it; I offered to go back, but no, he came on with me to Midas Creek. He—Oh, Mrs. Meredith, I did everything I could. I took the landlord into my confidence; I coaxed and threatened and persuaded; I did everything possible. It was useless. For two years he hadn't touched anything; he had been living entirely on the square. It might have been the excitement, it might have been the temptation; anyway, one evening when I was down at the store getting something, he went off his head. He drew his revolver on—those that tried to restrain him, and in the scrimmage that followed he was shot dead."

"And he is dead?"

"Mrs. Meredith, he is dead. You—you—I—words cannot express what I feel in having to come and tell you this. I don't know how to break it to you; I daresay I have bungled it; we men are such fools."

"No, you have been everything that is good and kind."

"I have tried to be," said Dick, "and I have succeeded none too well. It's true that I told Roger himself that if you'd only come out to Santa Clara —and I felt that I should find you just the same and that I could easily persuade you to come back with me—that you would be the making of the place, that you would be the making of him and me, that it would be a home, that it would be a totally different place. But now—don't you understand? Santa Clara is no place for you. It would be like going to find the husk when the kernel had been taken out of it."

He spoke excitedly. The little woman, whose hand he still held, sat like a creature turned to stone.

"Dead!" she murmured, "my Roger dead! And after all these wasted years, when we might have begun life over again—been everything to each other; when the way had been made clear and easy. Oh, it is hard! Oh, how hard! Oh, Mr. Vincent, Mr. Vincent, when a woman loves you, have faith in her; that's the great thing. He hadn't faith enough in me. He thought that I was like the woman of tradition—a creature who cared only for the loaves and fishes, for the downy cushion, for the way made smooth and clear. Oh, how mistaken! Didn't he understand—had he lived with me for years not to know how cheerfully I would have baked his bread and cooked his meat, how I would have toiled to make the bare iron hut pretty, how I would have coaxed the flowers to grow, and kept birds, and loved the dogs and the horses and everything that had life in it? No, he never knew me. You knew me better than he did. And yet—he cared."

"Oh, he cared," said Dick, "there's no doubt about that; from first to last you need never doubt that he cared. I think that he cared so much that he was afraid—his very love made him afraid; it seemed too great a thing to him that you should ever consent to go half-across the world to find him."

The widow looked at him with tearless eyes, staring out of her white face. "I would have gone ten times round the world. I would have gone through fire and water, to find my husband at the end of the journey."

For a moment Dick could not speak. He pressed the hand that he still held within his own, then set it free, and getting up from his chair strode to the window, where he stood looking out over the wide village street, at the shabby cab, the sleepy coachman and still sleepier horse which was awaiting him at the door.

At last he turned round. "Mrs. Meredith," he said, "after all, isn't it much better that you should know that all the time poor Roger was thinking about you, that he had never forgotten you, that you had never been supplanted in his heart by anyone? It's hard to find it out only when he is dead, but still, it's better than not knowing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's better than not knowing."

"Oh, yes. And, of course," he went on, "you needn't live such a narrow life now, because the half of Santa Clara is yours, and there will be plenty of money for all of us as time goes on. You can go away from this, you can travel where you will; everything will be quite different to you now."

"I suppose so." She looked round the pretty little room in a scared kind of way. "I wish," she said, "I almost wish that Roger had not sent to me."

"Oh, but certainty is better than uncertainty any day."

"Not when the certainty means the end of all your hopes. Oh, Mr. Vincent, you were right when you spoke of California as being the grave of all hopes. It has proved itself the grave of mine. Oh, think of the wives who go on living year after year, tied to men that they have never cared for, men who have

ceased to care for them; think of the husbands and wives fettered to each other like prisoners chained to a log, while we, who only wanted each other, were kept apart by circumstance—by Fate. Oh, it's cruel—cruel! And then, when we might be together, and as happy as ever we had been, to find all one's hopes dashed to the ground; to find the cup of joy held to one's lips, and dashed away before one could taste the draught it contained. Oh, how hard life is!"

She broke down and began to sob, with tears that wrung Dick Vincent's heart, with sobs that penetrated his very soul. And then she stretched out her poor trembling little hand and laid it upon his—the hand that had brought Roger Meredith's life to a close.

For a few minutes the little widow sobbed unrestrainedly on, and Dick sat there watching her with fascinated gaze, yet perfectly powerless to say or do anything which would be a comfort to her. Then she sat upright again and began to dab at her eyes fiercely with her handkerchief, which she had made into a ball.

"I mustn't let Cynthia find me crying when she comes in," she explained. "No, I mustn't let her find me crying. Cynthia is such a good girl, and she is always tired when she comes in at tea-time. Won't you send that cab away and stay until she comes? Won't you stop and have tea with us? It's—what is the time?"

"It's nearly four," said he.

"She will be home in a few minutes then. She comes immediately the school closes. It closes at four.

I should like you to see her. It won't be such a blow to her as it has been to me, because she has never really known her father. But you will stop, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, certainly I will stay. But don't you think, Mrs. Meredith, that if I stay and have a cup of tea with you, you had better come back into the town with me and have some dinner at my hotel?"

"I cannot go out merry-making," said she, shrinking back.

"Oh, it wouldn't be merry-making. And whatever one's griefs, one must eat. I have photographs, of a sort, of Santa Clara; you would like to see them. The change would be good for you. At all events, I'll keep my old cabman, in case you want to go into Blankhampton later on. I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll tell him to put up for an hour."

As soon as said carried into effect. Dick Vincent went out and told the old cabman that he was to go to the inn and get himself a drink, and a feed, if necessary, for the horse.

"Come back at five o'clock," he said. "Come back here. Here's the money for you. At five. Don't be much later."

"All right, sir," said the old driver. "Ill give my horse a bit of a feed, and, since your honour is so generous, I'll take a bit of a snack myself."

Then Vincent turned and went back into the house again. As he entered the sitting-room, something reminded him of the newspaper which he had in his breast pocket.

"You will perhaps like to see this, Mrs. Meredith,"

he said, taking it out and folding it so as to show the account of Meredith's death. "It's the paper that had the account of poor Meredith's end. I thought you would like to see it."

"Oh, yes, let me see it." She read it eagerly. "Oh, what a verdict! How strange! What curious creatures men are when they get on a jury. And they called a death which was brought about by drink the 'Visitation of God'! Mr. Vincent, somehow I can't think of Roger like that. I have seen him a little merry, you know, just a little, when he had a little too much, but I never saw him drunk, never. By this account he could not have known what he was doing; he must have been delirious."

"And so he was—delirious. He was mad for the moment—he was out of his mind for the time."

"He must have been. It's dreadful to think of him like that. Do you think, if I had gone out there, that I should have kept him straight?"

"For a time," said Dick. "Anybody who devoted herself to him would and could for a time keep him straight. I did as long as I was with him, as long as I watched him, as long as I kept a tight hand over him. So you would have done. But there is a fate in these matters, Mrs. Meredith. I believe myself that Roger's hour was come; that it had to be; and it was the foreshadowing of the end that made him so strange and so unlike himself from the moment that we turned our backs upon Santa Clara."

The little woman was restless and excited. She wandered about the room, put imaginary untidiness into order, went several times to the window, and

finally, murmuring something about seeing after tea, departed and left him alone.

That to Dick was worse than if she had remained sobbing and crying; because alone it suddenly occurred to him that if Meredith's widow had accepted his story without question, had indeed put no questions to him beyond the all-important one to her of the state of Meredith's heart so far as she was concerned, her daughter might prove to be a young woman of a very different calibre. What if she were to cross-question him as to the last details of her father's life and the circumstances of his death? What if she were to put certain point-blank queries to him concerning the fatal scrimmage? How could he answer? What could he say?

Would the girl never come? The church clock—he could hear it, although he could not see the church—struck the quarter after the hour. She was never so late as this. Stay! what was that? A step—a lifting of the door-latch—and Roger Meredith's daughter stood before him.

CHAPTER XIII.

CYNTHIA.

WHEN the door opened to admit Roger Meredith's daughter, Dick Vincent perceived with a great start that she was no other than the girl who had so impressed him the previous day in St. Thomas's Street.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she stammered.

She, too, was evidently somewhat taken aback, although Dick could not decide whether she had noticed him the previous day or not.

"I beg your pardon. I am afraid I startled you," said he.

"Oh, no. Of course I didn't know there was anybody here."

She paused, looking at him as if expecting him to say something more.

"I came to see your mother," said Dick; "and to see you, too."

"Yes."

At this moment the widow came back. As she caught sight of her daughter she rushed up to her, flung her arms, not about her neck, because she could not reach so high—but about her shoulders. "Oh, Cynthia, Cynthia, it has come at last!" she said, sobbing.

"What has come, mother? The news about my father?"

"Yes, dearest. The best news and the worst news; the worst news and the best. He is dead, Cynthia —dead!"

"My father dead?" The girl's voice was an echo of her mother's. "Poor little mother!" she said. "How do you know? Of course," turning to Dick, "you brought the news. Oh, my mother has waited so long. Why didn't he come?"

"Not for any fault, Cynthia," cried Mrs. Meredith. "Not for any fault, my dear. Mr. Vincent says I was as much to him, to the last day, as I had ever been. And I don't know how to tell you all, but they lived on in a struggle. Dear Mr. Vincent was his partner. They fought and struggled against—against hope; and then, when the good fortune came and there was money, your father didn't know—wasn't sure—that I should have waited for him."

The girl put her arm protectingly about her mother's shoulders and turned so as to confront Dick. "Of course my mother waited. He ought to have known that," she said, with a curious protective kind of pity. "My mother is one of those women who couldn't forget if she tried—fidelity itself. Did he really think that?"

"Your father thought," said Dick, "that it was not impossible that your mother might have married again. You see, so many years had gone by and he had never written, and life isn't very safe in the wild parts where he was. A man might be killed twenty times over, and his relatives hear nothing except by the purest chance. Nobody could have blamed your mother if she had married again."

"I had my chances," remarked Mrs. Meredith, plaintively.

"Of course. That was what Meredith felt. He knew you wouldn't be without chances, being what you are."

"Still," the girl burst out, "it would have been a horrible thing if mother had married again. Of course, you never thought of such a thing, did you, mother?"

"Never, my dear—never. There was only one man in the world for me, and he loved me when I was little more than a girl. And I shall never see him again—never!"

The girl held her mother close for a minute or so. "Tell me," she said, turning to Dick; "how did my father die? Was he ill long?"

"Your father was not ill," said Dick, "except in a sense. He was—well, he was killed."

"How?"

"Well—I suppose you wish me to tell Miss Meredith everything?"

"Oh, yes, I keep nothing back from Cynthia; she understands. I told her all that there was to know in the past, and there's no reason why she should not know all that there is to know in the present."

"Well, Miss Meredith, your father drank a good deal; not continuously, you know, but at times. When I came away from Santa Clara——"

"Santa Clara?" said the girl, looking at her mother.

"Yes. We were partners on a ranche; it was named after your mother. I fancy that the mere fact of being left alone for a few months, and the fact also

that he had commissioned me to make inquiries about your mother and you—to find out where you were, if you were living, whether your mother was still Mrs. Meredith, and whether there was any chance of her coming out to join him—proved too much for him, for he went in for a fearful bout of heavy drinking, and in spite of everything that we could do——Well, he ran amok; in short, he tried to kill a man staying in the hotel, who, in sheer self-defence, finding himself overpowered, shot him."

"What happened to the man?" said the girl.

"Nothing happened to the man," replied Dick. "Nothing could happen; he was perfectly blameless in the matter. It was a question of his life or your father's; and no man could be expected to give up his life at the mad freak of a man delirious with drink."

"No, you are quite right. What is his name? Who is he?"

"He disappeared from the hotel, by the advice of the landlord and several other people. They thought it would be the easiest way out of the difficulty."

"Had you ever met him before? Was he a stranger? Did you know him?"

"I never met him," said Dick. "I was down the town when the row began; I only came in for the tail-end of it. It was horrible!" he said, "horrible! I brought your mother the paper with what I may call the official account of the affair, and I have also with me a large sum which your father entrusted to my care, to make over to your mother if I should find her. I have also in safe keeping your father's will, by which, in the event of my finding you, he leaves

the half of the ranche to your mother. To-morrow I shall be able to transfer this money to your account, Mrs. Meredith; to-day it is, of course, too late."

"He has been very kind, Cynthia, most considerate. I'm sure if I had known him all his life he could not have broken the news to me more gently and more tenderly. I can't help breaking down a little; it's a blow to me, although I haven't seen Roger for fifteen weary years—fifteen weary years."

Roger Meredith's daughter made no pretence of being overcome with grief. She held her mother yet closer to her, with the same protective air that had so touched Dick before. "Dearest," she said, "I know what this disappointment must be to you, and what a grief; but certainty is better than uncertainty all the world over, and when you have got over it a little you will be comforted to think that all the time, when you thought he had forgotten, he hadn't forgotten at all, that he remembered you to the very last, and that his last reasonable act was to send you part of the good fortune which had come to him."

"Not a part of it, Cynthia, all of it," sobbed Mrs. Meredith, hiding her face on the girl's shoulder.

"Yes, dear, all of it. That's twice as happy for you as if he had sent you a part. It would have been very different if he had merely sent you word that he had come into luck and that you could go out and share it. But to send it home, for you to do as you liked, to give you all and leave you free, that's proof that he must have loved you just the same all the time."

"There was no shadow of doubt about his love, Miss Meredith," said Dick. "It was the fear that

your mother wouldn't come out to him that sent him off on that last fatal bout of drinking. Mind you, he didn't drink as a regular thing; he was a splendid fine man to the end."

"I'm sure he was," said Cynthia. "If he hadn't some good qualities, my mother wouldn't have loved him as truly and as faithfully as she has done during all these years of silence."

"Well, I am not so sure of that," said Dick. "I have known some charming women who pinned their whole faith to wretches in whom I could see no point of good. And the worse they got the more their women stuck to them and clung to them and bolstered them up. You see a good deal of that sort of thing out there, you know."

"But my father wasn't like that," said Cynthia, "no, not at all like that."

"Cynthia," said Mrs. Meredith, suddenly, "I came in to tell Mr. Vincent that tea was ready. It will be over-drawn."

"Never mind, dear, we'll brew a fresh pot."

It was perhaps natural that the girl should take the lead in everything. Dick Vincent followed her into the little dining-room, across the passage, with a feeling that she was the dominant power in the house. But he was mistaken. The same power and self-control which had enabled a young and pretty woman to remain faithful to the memory of a man who had, to all intents and purposes, deliberately deserted her, sufficed to make Mrs. Meredith the most important factor in the little household. At the moment she was overwhelmed, even crushed, by the news of her hus-

band's death, and by the important fact that from that moment her circumstances would be entirely different to what they had been since the beginning of her married life.

"Cynthia," said Mrs. Meredith, when she had been somewhat pulled together by a good cup of tea, "we will go out to Santa Clara."

Dick's heart went down to zero, and he waited with no small trepidation to hear what the girl would say.

"Just as you like, mother. I'd as soon go to Santa Clara as to any other part of the world. We've lived such a quiet life here in Gatehouses," she said, turning to Dick, "that it would be no wrench to us to leave the half-dozen friends who have never been much more than acquaintances."

"You won't like it," said Dick to the widow.

"Oh, I should love it!" she cried. "I should feel as if I had gone to join Roger after all."

"I don't think you would. It's a ghastly life; full of hard work, very few recreations, no comfort."

"We shall be able to have comfort," said Mrs. Meredith, confidently.

"Yes, but it is not necessary to go to Santa Clara to get it. As a ranche, it isn't worth having; as an oil well it doesn't need the presence of ladies to run it. You would hate it. I have not any intention, now that Meredith's gone, of going back permanently."

"But we should like it," persisted Mrs. Meredith. "Cynthia isn't like the ordinary society girl; she has no society to leave behind here, nothing but a recollection of hard toil, many humiliations, and few pleasures. Above all things we should like to go to

Santa Clara and carry on the ranche, just as we should have done if my dear Roger had lived and I had gone out there to rejoin him."

"Mrs. Meredith," said Dick, and by this time he was feeling no less than desperate, "it is absolutely impossible for you to continue the ranche as my partner. You are not fit for the life, and the life is not fit for you. As Meredith's wife it would have been a different matter altogether; as my partner it is an impossibility."

"But I should like to go out," she persisted.

"We must leave that for the present," said Dick, "because I am not going back for at least three months. I have left an excellent manager there, a good fellow, who was chosen mainly by your husband, and in whom he had the greatest confidence. It is not necessary for me to hurry back, and I have not been home for seven years. My mother would break her heart if I went back immediately. I shall never stay seven years at Santa Clara again. I may not give the ranche up; I may come to some arrangement with you by which we can continue it as a property—an oil property; but I shall never make Santa Clara my home again—indeed, there will be no need."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VOICE OF REASON.

It was Cynthia Meredith who brought the discussion concerning the advisability of her mother and herself going to Santa Clara to a close.

"One thing is very certain, dear mother," she said. "We cannot go to California now; we have everything to settle up here; for in any case you will not care to remain in Gatehouses, or even in Blankhampton. You know, Mr. Vincent," she went on, "that I am the mistress at the infant school here. The term comes to an end this week, and then I am free. As, naturally, I shall not continue the post, I shall be very busy getting everything ready to leave, and I shall give in my resignation to the Vicar at once."

"Of course! of course!" cried Mrs. Meredith. "I always hated your doing it, Cynthia, as you know."

"There was no reason why you should, dearest," said Cynthia. "It's not a hard way of making a decent living—at least, darling, not of making a living, but of supplementing a living."

"You have been very brave," cried Mrs. Meredith, sobs beginning to rise in her throat.

"Well, it's all over now, dear," said Cynthia, hurriedly, "and as we've got the half of an oil well to depend upon, it needn't trouble you that I worked for a few months among a lot of nice little children

like these Gatehouses mites. It will never trouble me," she cried, looking from one to another with a ringing laugh.

"I should think not," said Dick, half indignantly.

"But what does trouble me," said the girl, "or at least what does concern me, is that I want to have a long holiday. I want to get used to being well off and to rest myself; to—well, I'd like to go to some nice, bright seaside place for a few weeks before I even think about taking a journey half-way across the world."

"I think you are most wise," said Dick. "And if you will excuse me saying so, Miss Meredith, your mother must need that kind of relaxation much more than you do. So let us consider the question of your going to Santa Clara as shelved for the present."

"I didn't mean to start to-night," said Mrs. Meredith, with some show of spirit.

"No, dear, no; of course we knew that," said Cynthia. She was all tender compunction at having seemed to be unkind to her mother.

"To-night," said Dick, "you are coming to dine with me in Blankhampton. You promised, did you not?"

"I don't think I promised," said Mrs. Meredith.

"It would be better for you than brooding," said Dick.

"Well," put in Cynthia, "dear mother, I think it might take you out of yourself a little."

"After any sort of ill news," said Dick, "there's nothing like a thoroughly good meal; and no meal taken in one's own house has the same effect upon

one as a meal which is taken outside. After all, Mrs. Meredith, it will be a very quiet evening, and there can be no more in your coming and dining quite quietly with me at the Golden Swan than my taking a cup of tea with you this afternoon. I have kept the cab—at least, I told the driver to come back. If you would rather, I will go up to the inn and tell him to keep his horse in the stable for another hour; otherwise it will be here in a few minutes."

"Oh, well, we shall certainly not be ready in a few minutes," said Cynthia. "I confess, mother, that I should very much like to dine with Mr. Vincent to-night; I feel all unhinged—everything turned topsy-turvy; and I am quite sure that it would be the best possible thing for you. And, indeed, I do think it is most kind of Mr. Vincent to ask us."

"Oh, it isn't kind," said Dick. "On the contrary, the kindness is yours in giving me the pleasure of your society. You forget, Miss Meredith, your father and I lived together for seven years. We were the greatest possible friends—regular pals. To me it is the most natural thing in the world that I should see as much of you now as I should have done if he had lived, dear old fellow."

"I am sure," said Cynthia, simply, "that mother and I are delighted to have your friendship. Of course, we have not many friends. I think," she went on, with a wise little air, "that when people are poor they do not have many friends, unless—unless they belong to the quite poor classes! I mean unless they belong quite to the working class. Nobody wants struggling poverty."

"I don't know," said Dick, "I think it depends a good deal on the struggler."

As he spoke a sudden qualm shot through his heart, a sudden realisation that this young girl, with her limpid blue eyes and calm, self-reliant manner, would be desirable to any man, and under any circumstances. A sort of wonder passed through his mind that she could have walked about the streets of Blankhampton, as he had himself seen her the previous day, and have remained unwooed, or at least unwon, in the little cottage in Gatehouses in which they were now sitting. Then he shook himself free of the dream, and addressed himself once more to the mother.

"Then you will come and dine with me, Mrs. Meredith?"

"Well, since you and Cynthia both wish it, and, as you say, the circumstances are exceptional," she replied, "I don't mind, but we cannot go just now, can we, Cynthia?"

"Oh, no. We must have time to change our dresses. You had better go up to the inn, as you said."

"Shall I say six o'clock?" said Dick.

"Yes, that is nearly an hour. Oh," glancing towards the window, "there he is."

Dick Vincent got up. "It doesn't in the least matter. I will send him back to the hotel and tell him to order dinner for us."

It was as quickly done as said. Dick went out, and told the old driver to go back to the Golden Swan and tell the people there that he would be bringing two ladies back to dinner with him. "Tell them," said Dick, "to give us a very nice dinner, the sort

of dinner ladies like; and to get good fruit, and so on. Stay, I'll give you a card. Then come back here about half-past six."

"Very good, sir," said the cabman.

"You won't fail to come back?"

"Lor', no, sir."

"Don't you go taking any other job. I'll pay for your time."

"Right you are, sir."

And away he went, and Dick turned and went into the house again.

If he had admired Cynthia in her little grey frock of the previous day, and in the simple black skirt and cotton blouse that she had been wearing that afternoon, his admiration was increased tenfold when she came down into the little sitting-room dressed in a clean white muslin gown.

"Mr. Vincent," she said, "I am so glad you have made mother go out to-night. She would only have sat and cried and brooded over the past; and, after all, what good can it do?"

"No good at all," said Dick.

"It's no use my pretending," the girl went on, "that I am overwhelmed with grief. I am awfully sorry for mother, but I don't remember my father at all; and the fact that one's got a father somewhere makes very little difference to one's state of mind. I am sorry for my poor darling, and yet in one way I am so glad that she should know, that she should feel that all the time he was just as fond of her as ever. It seems a queer sort of way for a man to treat his wife, doesn't it? Everybody treat their wives differently."

"Or their husbands," said Dick. "I mean every one of us looks at every situation of life from a different standpoint to everybody else. If I were married now," he went on, "and I fell upon evil days, I should stick to my wife, and I should expect my wife to stick to me; and if I were obliged to leave her behind, as your father seems to have done, I should write to her every mail; and as soon as I had scraped the money together to pay for her passage, I should say, 'Come along; share what I have.' But he was different. He had always that dreadful temptation of strong drink. Before I knew him, seven years ago, he drank frightfully hard; he drank everything that he made: and I think he was ashamed to let her know just how things were. I am quite sure that at the last he was afraid that he had so indelibly written 'Drunkard' on his face that it would turn your mother against him if they met."

"And was he?—did he look?—I mean——"

"No, he didn't. He was weather-beaten. He was a man who had lived hard. But was a splendid man, and an intensely attractive man to the very last. I don't believe she would have seen a flaw in him, or noticed that he was the least little bit changed—not now that I have seen her. I told him so. I went by common-sense. But I couldn't convince him; no, poor chap, I couldn't convince him."

"Here's mother," said the girl, in an undertone.

Mrs. Meredith was dressed in black. For years she had always worn black, as being both economical and in accordance with her uncertainty concerning her husband. She had bathed her eyes, and had made a

toilet with care, and it smote Dick to the heart that so fair a little woman should not have had the chance of showing how generous and how forgiving she could be to the man whose heart was filled with her, but to whom the temptation of drink had ever stood as a barrier between them.

The evening passed quietly and pleasantly. As was but natural, they were very quiet and almost solemn in their conversation, and when the clock struck ten, Dick's old cabman came round and took the ladies home.

Dick did not offer to go with them until the last minute, when it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps if they went without him they would think it necessary to pay the cabman. He therefore suggested that he should see them as far as their house. Neither Mrs. Meredith nor Cynthia was unwilling, and when they reached the door of the cottage, Mrs. Meredith turned to Dick with quite the air of an old friend.

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" she said.

"Yes, you must see me to-morrow, Mrs. Meredith," he replied. "I must see you, to hand over the money for one thing, and to arrange various little business matters."

"Will you come and take lunch with us?" she inquired, half hesitatingly.

"I think not to-morrow," he replied, "because I want to go to the cavalry barracks."

"Do you know anyone there?" Mrs. Meredith asked.

"Well, it's my own old regiment, you see; and I

must go and lunch with them, or I am afraid they would be pretty furious with me. Couldn't I come up later in the day?"

Perhaps he had an eye to the fact that later in the day Cynthia would be there.

Mrs. Meredith hesitated yet more. "We don't dine late, Mr. Vincent," she said. "We have supper. I don't like to ask you to come to supper with us."

"Oh, why not?" he exclaimed eagerly. "I should be delighted to come to supper with you, if you would put up with me."

"Put up with you!" she exclaimed. And Cynthia laughed softly in a way which set Dick's heart beating at double quick speed. "Then it's settled—isn't it? You'll come and eat a bit of supper with us to-morrow night? It will be very simple, very plain."

"But I've not been accustomed to such banquets at Santa Clara, Mrs. Meredith, that the supper you will give me will not be all that I could desire. I can perhaps put you up to a wrinkle or two in the way of cooking a supper."

"What? You can cook?"

"Ah, can't I! I don't say that my pastry would be anything to boast of, but my pancakes and my omelettes are perfect; my curry's a dream. Mrs. Meredith, before I go back, let me come and make you a chicken curry. You can buy the oldest chicken, and I'll back myself to make a good curry out of it."

"Well, you shall; but not to-morrow. I would like you to try my cooking, and then you will see," she said, "what a very desirable person I shall be at Santa Clara."

Dick bade the ladies a hurried good-night, and got back into the cab with all his hopes dashed to the ground. That one little sentence of Mrs. Meredith's had served to bring back the events of the immediate past with tenfold force. Here he was already on intimate terms with Meredith's widow and daughter. In all his life he had never known what it was to feel his pulses quicken under the touch of a girl's hand as now; and yet—yet—it was impossible; although he had held himself and those on the spot had held him blameless for the accident of Meredith's death, the cold voice of Reason told him that he must not dare to think of taking Meredith's daughter for his wife.

CHAPTER XV.

THE OLD REGIMENT.

It was just after half-past twelve the following morning when Dick Vincent walked into the cavalry barracks. He found one or two subalterns gathered in front of the mess rooms, who looked upon him with enquiring eyes in which recognition was wholly lacking.

"Is Captain Allison here this morning?" he asked of the first of these young gentlemen.

"Yes," he replied, in easy tones, "he was here a minute or two ago. He will be in to lunch directly. Are you a friend of his?"

"Yes, I am."

At that moment an extremely handsome man came along the side of the officers' quarters and turned the corner sharply upon the group. The youngsters instinctively straightened themselves a little.

The newcomer uttered an exclamation of surprise as his eyes fell upon Dick. "Why, Dick, my dear fellow, how do you do? What good wind has blown you this way? I thought you were on the other side of the world."

"California," said Dick. "But I've come home on a few months' leave—I mean holiday."

"And you are staying in Blankhampton? How awfully jolly. Symonds, let me introduce you to Mr.

Vincent—whose name you have heard, of course. And this is Mr. St. Aubyn ; this Mr. Paget. Vincent, my dear fellow, you will have lunch with me, of course ? "

" Why, thank you, Brookes, I will," said Dick, as he shook hands with the last of the three subalterns, who were now regarding him with very different expressions of countenance to what they had met him with in the first instance. For, let me tell you, Vincent had left a reputation behind him in the Black Horse, a reputation for being the most good-natured daredevil to be found in the length and breadth of the land.

Colonel Brookes took him affectionately by the arm. " We missed you very much, Dick," he said ; " far more than you will ever have any idea of. You kept us alive. We've never had anybody to keep us alive as you did."

Dick laughed outright. " Well, I daresay that if you had stayed where I left you, which was senior captain, you would have found several among the subs. quite capable of throwing me entirely into the shade. You see, you have gone up into that exalted region which knows little or nothing about making practical jokes and such like amusements. Well, now tell me ; is there any news in the old regiment ? "

" News ? Well, I've got the command, of course ; and you know Bethune is senior major, and Cockledon junior to him. Allison comes next. And of those that were here with you—well, there's Dawson."

" Ah, yes. Good old Dawson ! Is he as serious and as musical as ever ? "

" Worse, my dear chap ; he's married."

"Married? Worse might happen to a fellow than that. And yourself?"

"Oh, I'm not married," said Brookes, shaking his head. "I didn't get the right woman; if you can't get the right woman you had better go without."

"I'm with you there," said Dick.

"And here's Allison," rejoined Lester Brookes.

"Hullo, Dick!" cried Allison. "What good wind has blown you to Blankhampton?"

"I had to come on business," replied Dick.

"Business? Oh, really. Where are you staying?"

"At the Golden Swan."

"Oh, really. Well, it's a decent hotel. Come and dine to-night, won't you? It's guest night."

"No, not to-night, old fellow. I'm engaged."

"Oh, dining out? Anybody I know?"

"I don't think so."

"Somebody I don't know in Blankhampton? That's funny. Where is it? Who are they?"

"Well, I'm quite sure that it's nobody you know," replied Dick. "The fact is that I came home from California charged with a mission from my partner—I took a partner, you know, when I went into ranching, and he died, poor chap; at least, he was killed. And this is his widow and daughter."

"Oh! What's their name?"

"Their name is Meredith."

"Meredith? Where do they live? What's the girl like?"

"Oh, so—so," said Dick.

"Ah, you never had an eye for a woman, Dick. I see you are not altered in that respect," said Allison.

"Meredith? Where do they live? I never came across them."

"Oh, they live at a little village a short way from the town."

"I know all the little villages a short way from the town," Allison persisted, "which one do they hang out in?"

"It's called Gatehouses."

"Oh! I thought I knew every girl in Gatehouses."

"They live very quietly, and they don't want to see anybody."

"Oh, I wasn't fishing," cried Allison, "I wasn't fishing, not a bit of it. It seemed curious, that's all. By Jove!" Allison went on, "there's one pretty girl that lives somewhere on the road to Gatehouses. Gad! she is pretty! I've followed her over and over again, but I've never been able to track her home yet. She always goes into some cottage or other, but when I inquire they tell me that they don't know who she is."

"Ah, that wouldn't be Miss Meredith," said Dick, although his heart told him it certainly was.

"Well, you'll dine to-morrow night—won't you?"

"Yes, I'll come up and dine to-morrow night with pleasure," Dick replied.

It was late in the afternoon before he got away out of the cavalry barracks. He had, of course, to make a sort of tour, to see all the colonel's horses, all Allison's horses, and, in fact, to go right through the officers' stables. Then he inquired for the good lady who had been accustomed to tidy his room and wash his shirts, and finding that she was still following the drum, he went round with Allison to pay her a visit.

Then at a little before five there was a rumour of

tea and hot cakes soaked in butter—and if you don't believe that they eat hot cakes or muffins soaked in butter in a cavalry barracks, you had better go and find out for yourself, and you will discover that I am perfectly right. And when the tea and cakes had been disposed of, he and Allison went down the town together, and he looked in at the Club, and was introduced to half-a-dozen Blankhampton celebrities, and then into the Winter Gardens, where the band of one of the cavalry battalions was just playing "God Save the Queen!"

Allison managed to introduce his old friend to several of the prettiest girls in Blankhampton—that region where beautiful women flourish. There was not one of them, however, who came anywhere near to Cynthia Meredith in Dick's estimation; and at last, at about twenty minutes to seven, he succeeded in shaking himself free of his friend, and got into a cab which would carry him once more to Gatehouses.

He did not, however, go quite direct. He stopped at a flower shop and bought some lovely cut flowers; and then he stopped at a bookseller's and purchased three or four of the leading illustrated papers. It was laden with these that he once more found himself in the little sitting-room which was stamped with the impress of beautiful Cynthia Meredith.

He went away that night more hopelessly in love with Cynthia than ever; and instead of going straight into the hotel and to bed, he tramped about the narrow deserted streets of the old city for more than an hour, wondering what would be the best course for him to take, wondering whether if he made a clean

breast of the whole circumstances of Roger Meredith's death, his daughter would ever bring herself to regard the fatal shot which brought that ruined life to a close in the light of a pure accident. No, it was not to be thought of. If Cynthia could be made to see that he had merely acted in self-defence, Cynthia's mother would certainly never hear reason on such a point. No, he had begun a system of silence, he had begun by withholding a certain amount of information, and it was impossible now to do anything which would disclose the truth.

He was standing in the very shadow of the grand old cathedral when he came to the conclusion that, under no circumstances, could Roger Meredith's daughter be anything more to him than a regret. It was hard, he pondered, that he should have grown to be thirty years old without having before met a woman whom he could love, and, having now met her, that she should be for ever barred as one of the unattainable joys of life.

It would be impossible for him to avoid meeting her again; that was out of the question. He must tread the road to his Gethsemane with unflinching feet; he must steel his soul against her. After all, it was early days; he must school himself to become no more intimate than he had already become; to avoid those little familiarities, so sweet and so easily taken up, so impossible to cut off when once acquired. After all, he argued, drawing fiercely at his pipe—after all, he had got along very comfortably for thirty years without feeling especially in love, and he would have to get along as comfortably for thirty years more.

When he had got thus far, he went back through the narrow streets and into his hotel. And then he went to bed and dreamed all night of Cynthia Meredith, waking up in the morning with the conviction that she was everything to him, and that there was very little reason why he should not be everything to her.

He had promised that he would go up about eleven o'clock that morning and fetch Mrs. Meredith, and that they should go together to the bank, where he would transfer the money to her which he had brought from her husband.

"It's just as well that dear old Roger did give me the money for you," said he, "because if it came to you by inheritance, or by will even, they'd have mulcted you of some of it. As it is, it was made over to me in Roger's life-time, and therefore not a soul but you and I know anything about it. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Meredith, I am downright glad to get it out of my hands; because I couldn't tell anyone that I had it until I found you, for had I done so, and anything had happened to me, it might have frustrated all that Meredith was so anxious to have done. However, now at last, in half an hour, it will be yours to do what you like with."

When they had settled their business at the bank, he insisted upon Mrs. Meredith walking down as far as Bonner's with him and having some sort of refreshment. At first she refused; but when he insisted she was persuaded to take a sponge cake and cream and curacoa.

"Mr. Vincent," she said, "I have made up my mind

that we must go to the seaside for a couple of months, so that Cynthia may have a thorough change before we enter upon any business tasks."

"I think you are wise," he said promptly.

"Oh, yes, it is absolutely necessary. We were talking last night. She wants to go to Brighton."

"You can't go to Brighton at this time of the year."

"But why?"

"My dear lady, it is impossible. Brighton is awful in hot weather, and very Jewish."

"I don't think they would hurt me," said Mrs. Meredith, "since, you see, I shouldn't know a soul."

"Well, I wouldn't go to Brighton. Brighton isn't the place for this time of year. Try Folkestone; Folkestone is gay enough and smart enough; not Brighton."

"You think not?"

"I don't think, I'm sure about it. Very good shops at Brighton it's true; but then if you are so near as Folkestone or Brighton, you could easily run up to town if you want a day's shopping."

"I don't think," said Mrs. Meredith, "that shopping will be any particular temptation to us at present. We have got to get used to having money to spend. Up to now we've only shopped from necessity; never as a luxury, never as a pastime. I should be hopelessly lost in London now," she said pathetically. "I should walk into the first shop I came to and let them fleece me how they would."

"So they would in Brighton just the same."

"Well, I don't think so. You see, we have been very dull; we have led such a retired, I may say such

a narrow life, that the more busy and crowded the place, the greater change it would be to us."

"Why don't you go abroad?"

"No, not at present. You won't think us mad if we go to Brighton, will you?"

"No, I shan't think you mad, but I shall think you are very mistaken people."

"Well, they've got an old proverb up here, Mr. Vincent, which says, 'Everybody knows their own know best'."

Dick drew back instantly. "Oh, Mrs. Meredith, I didn't mean—I didn't presume to dictate to you. You know I wouldn't do such a thing."

"I know you wouldn't. But without dictating, or wishing to dictate, or anything of the kind, you must see that I understand my own temperament and my daughter's better than you do; and I do believe that as Cynthia has set her heart upon going to Brighton, that it will be the wisest if I keep to our original plan —go down there, take comfortable rooms on the sea front, and stay there just as long as it amuses us or is beneficial to us."

"That, of course," said Dick, "must be according to your own judgment; and I daresay you are quite right, Mrs. Meredith. Wherever you are I shall find my way to see you. Indeed, there is so much business to be done in the future between us that we must keep in touch with each other."

The widow stretched out her little slim hand. "You were Roger's friend," she said softly, "and as long as I live nothing shall ever put you out of touch with me."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE VOICE OF THE CHARMER.

FOR a whole fortnight Dick Vincent remained at the Golden Swan in Blankhampton. He told himself that he must see poor Roger's widow and child through the difficulties of the move. Women, he argued, needed a man to give them advice and show them which way they were going. He forgot that little Mrs. Meredith had proved herself very capable of keeping her boat upright for fifteen years past. He never admitted to himself that the little lady, in spite of her soft eyes and pleasant tongue, had never taken his advice in any one particular. She made use of him, oh yes, in a thousand ways—but they were her ways, not his.

"That dear boy!" she called him to Cynthia. "Oh, if only your father had lived, what a joyful day it would have been for me to go to the place he called after me—to take up my broken life—to have been a happy, friendly, delightful party. Oh, Cynthia, Cynthia! It has come too late—too late!"

Dick was not by any means idle during the two weeks which followed the finding of Mrs. Meredith. He had naturally confided to his great friend, Allison, the bit of luck which had come to him in the shape of an oil well, and Allison, being of a genial, talkative

disposition, had carefully spread the news throughout the better circles of Blankhampton society. Blankhampton mothers were therefore quite in a flutter over the advent of this extremely handsome young man, who had such a satisfactory piece of property as an oil well at his back.

He had not been three days at the Golden Swan when Allison came in one day whilst he was eating his lunch, and sat himself down, a trim figure in undress uniform.

"Hullo! You'll have some lunch, old chap?"

"Yes, thanks; I will."

"How came you to be about, this hour?"

"Why, I came down to see you. Yes, I'll have some soup, please. There's a little woman in town called Manisty. She ain't a bad little sort. She wants you to come to tea this afternoon."

"Me?" exclaimed Dick. "Why, what does she know about me?"

"Oh, she's seen you about, you know. A chap of your distinction cannot go without notice in a place like this. You always did mash all the women."

"Me?" repeated Dick. "I never mashed anybody in my life."

"Well, you have this time, anyway; and Mrs. Manisty is giving a tea-fight this afternoon—and she gives rather nice tea-fights—and she wants me to bring you."

"Oh, I'm out of the way of tea-fights. I have been living in the wilds for seven years. I don't think she'll really care for me, you know; not if she is in her senses."

"Oh, I'll answer for her, if not her senses. You'd better come, because I said I'd take you."

"My dear chap, you shouldn't make promises for me. You shouldn't make promises for other people at all."

"I know I shouldn't, but I did all the same. You might come. The little woman would be very gratified."

"Well, I don't know the little woman," said Dick, cold-bloodedly attacking the beef.

"Well, she's a good sort. And you'll come? I'll call for you about half-past four. Now don't go and say you're engaged. I know there's some charmer up at Gatehouses, but you can't want to be living there."

"Oh, no, I'm not living there," said Dick. He went rather red and bent his face down over his plate.

"You might take me up there," said Allison.

"Oh, no; they are quite out of your line."

"Are they? Are they ugly?"

"Oh, no."

"Then they are good-looking. I know you, I know you inside out, Dick; nobody ever knew you better. What are you doing to-night? Will you come and dine?"

"No, I can't."

"Why not? What are you doing? You are going to Gatehouses."

"No, I am not."

"Well, they are coming to dine with you."

"Yes, they are."

"Then you can ask me."

"No, I'd rather not."

"What? Are you sweet on the girl? You don't think I'd go poaching on your preserves, do you? Don't you know me better than that after all these years?"

"It would be a case of cut me out if you could, old boy, if there was a question of cutting out, which there isn't. But Mrs. Meredith has only just heard of the death of her husband, and she mightn't like to meet a perfect stranger."

"Oh! How long has he been in California? Fifteen years, didn't you tell me the other day? And you were commissioned to go home and find her. I should think she's about got over the parting by this time. I shall come. What time are you dining?"

"Never mind."

"Oh, that's all right. I shall turn up at about a quarter-past seven; if you are dining at seven, I shall cut in; if you are dining at half-past, I shall be in plenty of time."

"Well, you can come if you like," said Dick.

"I will. Thank you very much. So kind of you to ask me. I am delighted to accept."

Dick gave a grunt and a laugh. "What a humbug you are! Never saw a chap so little changed in my life."

"No, I am not changed, my dear fellow. I have got nothing to change me. Life has gone on in one unbroken round of field days and dances, and a few entertainments thrown in. You can't change on a diet like that."

"Why do you stick at it?"

"Why do I stick at it? It suits me well enough. I have not the brains for a more arduous profession. And after all, if you come to that, I don't know that there is anything elevating about planting vineyards and growing fruit trees, as you have been doing for seven years."

"Oh, it was a question of lungs with me. I wouldn't have jacked up the old regiment to go and bury myself alive out West, even for an oil well. If a chap's lungs give out, what is he to do?"

"No, true. Yes, waiter, I'll have some more of that salad. It's extremely good. It's the best salad I've eaten for a long time. It's the one thing our cook fails in—as I tell the mess president every day of my life. He mixes a salad as if it were something sour."

"I didn't notice anything wrong with it the other day when I was lunching," said Dick, indifferently. "But seven years on a ranche without a cook of any kind doesn't make a man more fastidious. Well now, look here, old chap; I don't want to go to this party this afternoon."

"Oh, but you must go. I've kind of staked my professional honour on it; and the little woman will be furiously disappointed if you don't turn up; she'd take it as an insult. She hasn't any daughters, so that needn't upset your apple-cart."

"Oh, all right. Well, I'll go. But since you have been talking about me, I suppose you have thrown in a mention of the oil well in the background. You might spread the information that I'm not by way of being a marrying man."

"All right, old chap, I'll warn 'em all off. And I'll come for you about four, eh?"

"Oh, all right."

The result of this first plunge into the vortex of Blankhampton society was to make Dick Vincent the most sought after young man in the neighbourhood; and this in spite of the frankly brutal way in which Captain Allison spread the news far and wide that Dick was a "gone coon" in the direction of his old friend's daughter.

"My dear Mrs. Manisty," he said to the little lady in question, who, although she had no daughters, was reputed to be the cleverest matchmaker in the town, "it isn't a bit of use wasting twopennorth of trouble over Vincent, or his books, or his family, or his oil well, or anything else. He's got a partner in the oil well already—in the shape of Meredith's daughter; and if he doesn't end by making her a partner for life, I'll eat my hat."

"And is she presentable?"

"Presentable!" echoed Allison. "No, Mrs. Manisty, she's not presentable, she's the loveliest thing I ever saw in my life. She's a lady born and bred—although she's been poor up to now. Nobody else will have a look in with Vincent, although he'd be fit to bite my head off if he could hear me say so. But I tell you, because I know how good-natured you are in arranging these little matters. I am afraid you won't do any business with Vincent."

"I should like to meet the young lady," said Mrs. Manisty.

"Oh, I don't think you would—at least, I don't

think she would. They have lived a very retired life, because they hadn't the money for anything else ; and they are just on the eve of leaving the place. Besides, Mrs. Meredith has only recently heard of her husband's death, and she doesn't want to be visiting or making new acquaintances at present."

But the Blankhampton matrons who had heard of the oil well, and who had seen Dick, were not thus to be warned off the chase, and Dick became the recipient of so many invitations and so many smiles and of so much friendliness that he began to think it would be necessary to fly the country before Mrs. Meredith and Cynthia were ready to go to Brighton. Every moment that he could get away from the claims of Society he spent in the little house at Gatehouses ; and when the mother and daughter left it with their few personal belongings, so that the auctioneer's people might take possession, he seemed to be morning, noon, and night in their pleasant lodgings overlooking St. Thomas's Street.

Once or twice he found himself perilously near to telling Cynthia how completely she had taken possession of him, body and soul. One evening, when Mrs. Meredith was suffering from a headache, he had taken her up the street and into the Winter Garden—at all hours of the day the most pleasant rendezvous in Blankhampton.

The air of the summer evening was still and warm ; behind them stretched the great glass houses wherein Blankhampton disported itself during the winter months ; around them lay the lovely lawns, on which Blankhampton took the air during the summer ; above,

a golden moon cast its light upon the winding river, which flowed at the end of the terraces. They could hear the sound of a piano floating across the gardens, the sound of a piano and of a girl's fresh voice. It was a night to make the most diffident man speak his mind; it was a night to make the most difficult girl come like a bird to the hand of the tamer.

"It's jolly here, isn't it?"

Cynthia turned her grave grey eyes upon him. "Should you call it jolly?" she asked.

Dick laughed. "It depends on the definition of jolly. Perhaps if I had thought before I spoke, which I didn't, I should have put it in another way; but it's very perfect sitting out here, in this still, tranquil English air."

"Is it different to Californian air?" she asked, turning and looking at him.

Again the mention of California, and a certain look in her eyes, suddenly brought Roger Meredith back to his mind—not only Roger Meredith but that last look in his eyes before he had drawn the trigger of his revolver.

A cold chill settled down upon Dick, and he shuddered visibly. "There is a great deal of rot talked about California," he said, almost harshly. "People here have an idea that California is literally teeming with milk and honey. It is the greatest mistake in the world. There is nothing like this over there. And, Miss Cynthia, it's very chilly, after all. I think we had better go in."

He went back to his hotel that night with his whole being in a tumult. He told himself savagely, over

and over again, that he was a fool—that he was playing with edged tools—that he must get this girl out of his mind before the damage was too late to undo.

"If she knew," he argued, "if she knew the truth, why, neither she nor her mother would ever bring themselves to look at me. They might in common justice own that I hadn't any choice in the matter, but the fact remains the same, that mine was the hand that sent Roger Meredith out of this world into the next. They are women. They'd never get over it. I must clear out of this, and make up my mind that Roger Meredith's daughter is not for me."

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. VINCENT'S FEARS.

FROM the night when Dick Vincent came to the conclusion that under no circumstances could Roger Meredith's daughter ever become his wife, he kept himself most carefully from any special intercourse with her. He proposed no more evenings in the Winter Gardens, he addressed all his conversation, or at least a good deal of his conversation, to the little widow; he allowed himself no familiarities, and he permitted himself to be drawn a little further into the vortex of Blankhampton society than he would have dreamed of doing under ordinary circumstances. Indeed, during those few days in which he remained at the Golden Swan, more than one mother in Blankhampton had visions of a proprietorial interest in the oil well at Santa Clara.

But eventually Dick went away, leaving behind him no promise of spring. He did not even travel up as far as London with Mrs. Meredith and Cynthia, but told them as an excuse for not doing so that he had promised to dine at the Black Horse mess.

Then he went back to London, where he put in a miserable week—so miserable that he more than once caught himself wishing that he were back on the ranche again. After that, he went home to Holling-

ridge, where his mother once more killed the fatted calf in his honour, although the whole house was in a tumult over the preparations for his sister's wedding.

"Now tell me, dear boy," said Mrs. Vincent, when dinner was over the first evening, and the others had wandered away to various amusements or occupations, "you found poor Mr. Meredith's widow?"

"Oh, yes, I found her," said Dick.

"Is she nice?"

"Very nice."

"A lady?"

"Oh, a perfect lady," Dick answered.

"Was she upset? Do tell me about it. I am most interested."

"Well, she was a bit knocked over at first, yes she certainly was knocked over, because she has always clung to the hope that he would turn up again."

"And the girl?"

"Oh, well, the girl doesn't remember him; she was more philosophic about it."

"Well, dear, one could not expect her to be anything else. Most trying, I consider, to go on year after year, never sure from one minute to another what might turn up or come out. Poor soul! I have thought about her so much whilst you have been away. You paid over the money; and what will become of the ranche?"

"Well, I shall have to prove Meredith's will as soon as I go back," Dick replied.

"Wouldn't you like me to ask them here for a little while?"

"Oh, no, mother, thank you. I don't think so;

not at present, at all events. You see—well, she's had a great shock, and she's in very new mourning; and they have gone off for a long holiday for one thing."

"Oh, for a long holiday. What sort of circumstances did you find them in?"

"Well, pretty narrow; what one would call straitened circumstances. And of course Mrs. Meredith's first idea was to give her daughter a complete holiday and change. That was only natural."

"Oh, it was natural enough, poor woman; I can quite see that. Had she money?"

"Mrs. Meredith had a little money."

"Yes. And did they live on that exclusively?"

Mrs. Vincent was insistent. She meant to get to the bottom of the Meredith story, and Dick knew by long experience that it was useless for him to try to wriggle out of giving the information which she required.

"No. The girl was teaching."

"Oh." Mrs. Vincent's tone was comprehension itself. "Teaching, was she? And you say she's so pretty."

"Oh, very pretty."

"And nice?"

"Very nice. Charming."

"And teaching? Dear me! Ah, dear, well I suppose there will be no fear of poverty in the future."

"Not the very smallest," said Dick. "She's an heiress now—unless the oil well should dry up, which is most unlikely."

"Oh, she'll marry, my dear. A pretty girl with half

an oil well is sure to marry. Perhaps her mother will marry."

"I don't think so. She's absolutely faithful to poor old Roger's memory. The only thing that hurt her much was his notion that she might have married somebody else, believing him to be dead."

"Poor thing!" said Mrs. Vincent, feelingly. "I can imagine nothing more dreadful than to live like that. And all these years, poor soul, really living on the edge of a razor."

"Yes, really living on the edge of a razor," said Dick. "Great bore to think yourself free, and then all at once find a husband turn up again."

"Oh, my dear boy," said Mrs. Vincent, "it was just as well that your poor friend was taken out of it. They would have had a dreadful time together."

"Do you think so?" said Dick.

"Yes, dear; sure of it. It doesn't do for people to go away and be parted like that. They are not the same when they come together again."

"Oh, I don't know. I have been away seven years; you don't find me any different, do you?"

"Well, I do," said Mrs. Vincent. "You have got some queer, old-fashioned, bachelor ways of your own."

"Have I?" cried Dick.

"Well, yes, I must confess that you have."

"Not really?" asked Dick.

"Yes, my dear boy, really," persisted his mother.

"How horrid!" was Dick's rejoinder.

"Well, dear boy, perhaps you will be doing away with your bachelorism."

"I don't think so," said Dick, shortly.

"No? It seems a pity."

Mrs. Vincent meant that it would be a pity to let somebody else take possession of the oil well; but Dick, who had once been as simple and open as the day, was sufficiently changed for her to hesitate in putting the thought into plain words.

"I don't see that there is any particular pity about it," said Dick.

"Well, dear, it would be a sad thing if the old name should die out."

"It won't die out," said Dick; "there's Jack Vincent—who can keep up the traditions of the old place far better than I should."

"Jack Vincent!" cried his mother, with an air of disgust. "Jack Vincent indeed—to rule at Hollingridge! Why your father would have a fit at the very mention of it."

"Don't mention it, dearest," said Dick, easily. "If I want to marry later on, I shall marry. If it pleases Providence to send me an heir, well, that will do away with Jack Vincent's chance. But if I don't want to marry, I certainly shall not do so to keep Jack out of the inheritance, to which he has quite as much right as I have."

"No right in the world," cried Mrs. Vincent.

"Oh, come, come, you are prejudiced," said Dick. "There's time enough, dear; and any day the next ten years will do to discuss that contingency. I'll bet you the governor never worries his head about it."

"More than you think," said Mrs. Vincent.

"Does he? Poor dear! I am sorry. I wish he wouldn't, and I wish you wouldn't. To tell you the truth, mother, I hate to think of the time when there will have to be a change of ownership. The governor is in his right place as the squire, and you are in your right place as mistress of Hollingridge. Why you should be anxious to bring somebody else in who would eventually turn you out, I can't think."

"I hope I am not selfish," cried his mother.

"Selfish! Never anybody less so."

"Then you wouldn't like me to ask Mrs. and Miss Meredith down for a few days?"

"No, I don't think so."

The very thought of Cynthia at Hollingridge was enough to set his pulse beating at double quick time. With an insurmountable barrier between them, it would indeed, his thoughts ran, be foolish if he allowed his mother to foster any greater intimacy than existed between them at present. Of course, he reminded himself, she, poor darling, did not know why it was better he should see as little of Roger Meredith's daughter as possible.

"I can't think," said Mrs. Vincent to Laura a few hours later, "what has come over Dick."

"Dick's all right, mother," said Laura.

"No, he isn't all right. There's something on his mind. He's quite changed from what he was before he went away."

"Well, dear, seven years of isolation would change any man."

"Yes; but he has changed since he came back. I don't know what has happened, but something is

weighing on Dick's mind. My dear, I do think we might ask the St. John girls over."

"The St. John girls? Why?"

"Because they are bright and pretty—and Dick might fall in love with one of them."

"But you don't want Dick to fall in love with one of them, surely?"

"Yes, I do."

"But why?"

"Because I think it would be better for him to be married and have a nice wife of his own, who would go to and fro between England and California, and make life altogether different for Dick."

"I don't think you had better try interfering with Dick's love affairs," said Laura, wisely.

"Not interfere, dear, no—not for the world; that I have never done with any of you. But to put nice girls in his way, that is different. I am not like some mothers," she went on, preening herself complacently, "who can't bear to think of their sons marrying. I want him to marry, I want him to have a nice wife—one of our own sort, to be one of ourselves. I like the St. John girls."

"Yes. Would you like them as daughters-in-law, do you think?"

"Well, only one at a time, dear," said Mrs. Vincent, with dignity.

"I see. I don't think you would like the St. John girls at all. Dad can't bear them."

"I never heard him say so," cried Mrs. Vincent.

"I have, many a time," said Laura. "Oh, don't worry, dear, about Dick. Dick isn't feeling very well;

he's bothered about the Meredith affairs. Don't get fancying things about him; he has quite enough on his mind, poor dear, without you worrying. You know, darling mother, you can't worry without showing it."

"My poor boy!" said Mrs. Vincent, pathetically. "I wish he would confide in me."

But Dick neither confided in his mother nor in anyone else. He passed his time between Hollingridge and Foxborough, taking all that was to be had in the way of shooting at either place. Then he received a letter from Mrs. Meredith.

"We feel quite hurt," she wrote, "that you have not yet been to see us. This isn't keeping your promise, dear Mr. Vincent. Do find time, when you have killed all the poor birds in your neighbourhood, to come and see us in our resting-place here. Cynthia is as happy as a child, and is looking better every day. For my own part, I particularly want to see you, that I may consult you about various business matters which are too much for me to decide alone. Do make an effort and come down for a few days."

So she was as happy as a child; and the little widow could not get on without him any longer. He knew that he had no choice but to go and take up at Brighton the same terms of intimacy that he had been on at Blankhampton. There was no getting out of it; he had no single excuse that could for a moment hold water with an astute little woman like Cynthia's mother. Yes, he would have to go.

He broke the news to his mother, half-expecting that she would grudge his absence, but Mrs. Vincent

still had an eye to the other half of the oil well, and she was instantly all sweet and friendly sympathy.

"Wants to consult you on business, does she?" she said. "Poor little woman! Yes, you must go, dear boy. You can't leave her in the lurch. I suppose she wants to know how to invest the money you brought over—or something of that kind. Poor little soul! I wish you had let me have them here for a bit."

"I didn't want them here," said Dick, shortly.

"No, no; so you said, dear. But I wish you had. I think it would have been kinder on our part."

"No kindness at all," said Dick.

"No?" queried Mrs. Vincent, and dismissed the subject from the conversation.

"Oh, how he does dislike that poor girl," she remarked to Laura afterwards.

"What poor girl?" asked Laura.

"Why, the girl—Meredith's daughter."

"I don't think he does."

"My dear child, I'm perfectly certain of it. I wanted to have them here—it seems only a natural thing when Dick was her father's great friend that—well, that the first visit should be to Dick's father and mother. Dick wouldn't hear of it."

"Oh, wouldn't he? I suppose Dick knows. What makes you think he doesn't like her?"

"I don't think about it, my dear child; I am perfectly certain of it. He shut me up."

"Dick shut you up, mother?"

"Yes, shut me up quite short."

"Oh, mother, what nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense, dear child; it's fact."

"I suppose she's rich?" said Laura.

"Rich? She's got the other half of the oil well," cried Mrs. Vincent, with what was almost a scream.

"Ah, and you are thinking of the oil well, are you, darling? Well, if Dick likes her, he wouldn't like her to think that he had an eye to the oil well."

"This is positively silly!" cried Mrs. Vincent.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SOMETHING CALLING.

PROBABLY a less conceited man than Dick Vincent has never been born into the world. Nevertheless he could not hide from himself, when he walked into the Merediths' lodgings at Brighton, the fact that Cynthia's grave grey eyes lighted up in a radiant blaze of glory as he entered the room.

"Now you'll dine with us here to-night?" said Mrs. Meredith, when they had exchanged greetings and she was pouring out a cup of tea for Dick.

"No, no. You'll dine with me at my hotel," said he.

"I don't think that's right."

"Oh, yes, it is; most right. I haven't been to Brighton for years; in fact, I doubt if I have been here more than twice in my life; and I shall be most hideously disappointed if you don't take me to all the sights and dine with me every night."

"Oh, but that is not fair."

"Yes, it is quite fair. You give me your society——"

"And you give us our dinner," laughed Cynthia.

"Well, if you like to put it that way, Miss Cynthia. I don't in the least care how you put it, so long as I have my own way."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Meredith, making a great show of yielding, "we won't quarrel over a point like that."

"We won't quarrel about anything," said Dick. And somehow, in spite of himself and of his wise resolutions, his eyes sought Cynthia's, and on Cynthia's soft round cheeks there rose a colour which turned the faint peach-bloom of her natural tint to a fine roseate hue. In a sense Dick lost his head. He was intoxicated by the charming beauty of her presence, by the charm of her manners, the thrill of her musical voice, the ineffable delight of her presence.

Then memory pulled him up with a jerk once more, and with a stifled sigh he turned to the little widow, who looked most dainty in her becoming widow's cap. "You wanted to consult me, Mrs. Meredith?" he said, with quite a change of tone.

"Ah, yes, but that will keep till to-morrow. We won't talk business to-day. To-morrow morning I will show you the papers that I wanted to consult you about, and we will be as business-like as the most business-like man could desire. To-day we will forget; we will only be friends to-day."

"I am only too happy to be your friend," said Dick, "and we will leave all the business affairs until the cold and calculating morn. Meantime I see that the theatre is on. Shall we go to-night?"

"It would be pleasant," said Mrs. Meredith. "We have seen so little—Cynthia and I."

"We have seen nothing," put in Cynthia with a gay laugh. "I think, darling mother, that would be nearer the mark. We have seen nothing. You see,

Mr. Vincent, dear and sweet as our vicar was at home, I think he would have drawn the line at the schoolmistress going to the theatre. So we never went—except sometimes when we were at Rockferry for our summer holiday. The theatre at Rockferry isn't large."

"The theatre here at Brighton is a large one," said Dick. "There is always a good company, and on Thursday afternoons always a piece down from town. I shall take tickets on my way back to the hotel; or stay—I can take them in the hotel itself."

It must be confessed that, even to Dick's masculine eyes, Mrs. Meredith and Cynthia had done themselves very well in the matter of mourning. It is true that Mrs. Meredith was wearing weeds, but they were of the most pronouncedly fashionable type. Her Marie Stuart cap was an airy creation, more like an announcement that its wearer was a widow than any symbol of grief. Her crape bodice was cut square, and filled into the throat with white pleated lisse. If she had looked to Dick very young at their first interview, she certainly seemed ten years younger now that he saw her well and fashionably dressed. As for Cynthia, she was adorable. Her simple yet elegant morning toilet was cut so as to show a little of the softly rounded throat and her round and slender wrists.

"She is the image of her mother," Dick's thoughts ran, "but, thank God, not so determined a character." And then he remembered with a pang that he need not thank God—that Cynthia Meredith would never be anything to him.

He thought about her as he walked along the sea front to his hotel. She would never be anything to him—yes, always, always the one woman in the world to him; his heart would ever turn to her as the most fair and perfect of her sex; nothing could take that away. She could never be his wife because of that secret which lay hidden in his heart. She could never be his wife, but she always could and she always would be his ideal.

He felt comforted as he turned into the hotel, and it was with a cheerful heart after all that he ordered a little table to be reserved for dinner, and then went out to the bureau to see what places he could get for the theatre.

This done, he went up to his room and dressed with quite a light heart, and when the two ladies arrived he met them with a beaming smile of welcome. Poor Dick! It was so hard to remember when in Cynthia's sweet presence that he must keep his heart under lock and key, that he must not let himself go, that he must watch every word that fell from his lips, that he must never forget that between them there was a great gulf fixed, a gulf which could never be bridged over on this side the grave. Left to himself, he might have forgotten—nay, it is safe to say he would have forgotten—but that curious likeness to her father in Cynthia's eyes brought him up every now and again as if he were a bird tied by the leg to a stone. It was curious, because Cynthia was so absurdly like her mother; it was only now and again, only when Dick felt the most drawn towards her, that that strange look of Roger Meredith would step in

between them, of Roger Meredith as he had seen him last.

Well, the morning after the dinner and the visit to the theatre, Dick went round to the Merediths' pleasant rooms in order to see what was the business on which Mrs. Meredith desired to consult him.

"Ah, it is you," she said, in a tone of satisfaction. "How good of you to come so early! Cynthia has gone out for a blow on the front, so we are quite alone. Now, I am going to take you right into my confidence."

"I hope so," said Dick.

"I daresay you won't be pleased," said the little woman.

"Oh, why not?"

"Because I am going to tell you what, somehow, I feel will vex you."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Meredith. Why should anything you tell me vex me?"

"Well, we like Brighton."

"You are thinking of taking a house here?"

"Not at present. You know, all our treasures—heaven knows they are not many!" she said, with a sigh and a smile, "I have left in safe keeping in London."

"Yes?"

"By and by we shall settle down somewhere, and we shall make ourselves a home; but not yet."

"No? You desire to travel?"

"Yes, that's just it. We desire to travel. Now we want to know when you are going back to Santa Clara."

"I propose to go back in about six weeks' time," he replied.

"Six weeks' time? Now, I know you will be vexed at what I am going to say."

"I will try not to be, Mrs. Meredith."

"Well, we want to go over with you."

"Oh, but——"

"Yes, I knew you would say 'but'—yes, of course I knew that; but we want to go, do you see? And we mean to go."

"Of course, if you mean to go, if you have set your minds on going," said Dick, "well, I suppose you will go."

"I suppose we shall," said the little widow.

"I quite understand your wish to see the place, it's a perfectly natural wish; to you there is something very fine and delightful in the idea, but you won't enjoy it."

"No, perhaps not. But I shall have satisfied myself."

"Satisfied yourself!" His heart was beating so that he could scarcely pronounce the words. "Satisfied yourself!" he echoed.

Mrs. Meredith nodded. "Yes," she said, "I have set my heart on seeing the place where Roger passed the last seven years of his life. I mean to go to his grave. Oh, yes, I mean to go to the place where he died."

"You must do as you like," said Dick, in a steady, calm voice.

I am bound to confess that his calmness was the calmness of despair. He felt assured that once Mrs.

Meredith found herself at Midas Creek, in the very hotel where Roger had died, she would spot—yes, that was the word he used, remember gentle reader; do not think that I, his author, am using so unliterary a word, I am but detailing his thoughts at the moment, and that was the phrase as Dick Vincent put it in his mind—she would spot the identity of the man who had fled by the advice of the landlord and Valentine Clegg; she would root out Valentine Clegg; she would do a thousand things that would be inconvenient and tiresome. Well, let her do it. Let the worst come to the worst; he could but own to it all and explain that his only thought in concealment had been to save her pain. After all, nobody could blame him. It was a mere matter of sentiment, it could be but a mere matter of sentiment that his happened to be the hand on the revolver at the critical moment when Meredith's brain gave out; there was nothing personal about it. Oh, the woman was determined; she must do as she pleased. If she chose to go to Santa Clara, she must go.

"What are you thinking of, Mr. Vincent?" said Mrs. Meredith, looking at him fixedly.

"I was wondering how we could manage the journey so that you would be tolerably comfortable," he replied.

"Oh, as to that we are no feather-bed creatures, sugar and salt, wrapped in cotton wool. You came down; where you came down we can go up."

"That doesn't follow," said Dick.

"Well, it doesn't; but if we suffer, why, we suffer; and it will be no fault of yours, for I can honestly say

that you genuinely tried to scare me off. But I am not to be scared off. I want to see the place that was called after me. I have never had a yard of earth in my life—not so much as the freehold of a grave. I have got a fine estate out there; I want to see it."

"Yes, well, that is possible enough," said Dick. "All that I am afraid of is that you will be hideously disappointed when you do see it. Over here one somehow thinks of California as a garden. There is precious little of the garden about it, Mrs. Meredith. However, if you have made up your mind to go, perhaps it is better that you should go and get it done with. You won't want to stay there very long, that's certain. You think of the ranche as a fine estate; as far as money value goes it is a fine estate; as far as beauty goes, don't have any idea that you are going to find the counterpart there of what you call a fine estate here. If you go out there, if it is only for a month, you will go out to a rough life, to rough work, to a total want of convenience, to disappointment—yes, I am certain to disappointment—but you will be satisfied. I won't say another word against it."

"Now I never thought I could bring you round to reason like that," said Mrs. Meredith, looking at him with a quizzical air. "I told Cynthia to go out and stop out till one o'clock, because I expected it would be a long time before I should bring you to reason."

"But, my dear lady, there's no bringing me to reason. You are free to do as you choose. You have a perfect right to go out if you wish to do so. I only have tried to dissuade you because I have been there, and I know how beastly it all is to an English mind;

but if you have set your heart upon it, why, there's nothing more to be said. I can't stop your going. You won't want to go twice."

"That's as may be. I am delighted that you have come round, and that you are so sensible. I hate people who are not sensible. Something tells me that I ought to go; something that's with me by day and most of the night, something that's always about me, says: 'Go to Santa Clara. You will be happy when you have been to Santa Clara.' Now, should I have such a feeling for nothing?"

"I don't know," said Dick. "You might. I don't feel that you will be any happier for going. But then I am not you, and you must do as you like. Do you think he—do you wish me to think that—I mean, is it that—that Meredith himself is calling you," he asked, in a curious strained voice, "that Meredith is influencing you from where he may be, that he wants you to go—is urging you to go? Do you think Meredith wants you to clear up anything connected with his death?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A TIME OF INDECISION.

WHEN Dick Vincent put the question straight to Roger Meredith's widow which asked whether she had any feeling that there might be some mystery to clear up connected with his death, he felt exactly as if he were signing his own death warrant.

"I don't know," she said. "It might be. I can only tell you that ever since I knew that Roger was dead, I have had the same curious feeling that I must go to Santa Clara, the feeling of somebody calling me. I don't know whether it is Roger, or not. I only know that I must go."

"In that case," said Dick, "I think that you are perfectly right to make up your mind and carry it through. So, Mrs. Meredith, we will consider it settled. I will do my best to make you feel the journey as little as may be; it's a very tedious journey, and you will find but little comfort when you get to the end of it; except the comfort of having a mind at ease."

"You will stay and have lunch with us?" said Mrs. Meredith presently, when they had finished their business talk.

"Oh, you are very kind. Yes, I'd like to—if it doesn't inconvenience you."

"Not the least. And Cynthia will be delighted. She wanted to see you; she has something that she wants to ask you. No, I won't tell you what it is, because I hate having things said for me. Oh, Mr. Vincent, I can't tell you how delighted she will be that you have consented to our going out with you."

"Consented? I wish you wouldn't put it in that way. The world is perfectly free to you, to do as you like, and Miss Cynthia also. I had no business to give an opinion even—let alone consent. Surely, Mrs. Meredith, you understood that from the beginning?"

"Oh, yes; but we shouldn't have gone dead against you. We've too much faith in your judgment for that. We quite see now what you meant about Brighton. Mind, I think it was the best place under the circumstances—yes, I think it was quite the best place that we could possibly have come to; but I quite see why you disapproved, and I think you were perfectly right. I shouldn't like to live here, except in the winter; I shouldn't like to come here another year—another summer. As it is, I fancy that it has served our turn better than any of us know; and I think when you see Cynthia you will agree with me."

When Dick Vincent did see Cynthia Meredith he was convinced of one thing—that she was the loveliest girl he had ever seen in his life, and that if he should live to be a hundred years old, no other woman would ever have quite the same effect upon him as she. She, on her side, was unmistakably delighted to see him again, but in truth Dick himself was too overwhelmingly in love to be able to read quite accu-

rately what her face ought to have told him. In his self-abasement he put down the softly shining eyes, the delicately blooming cheeks, the gay insouciant manner to the benefit that she had received from change of air. Without doubt the girl was better for the rest and change and ease which had come into her life; she was the better for these things, as her mother was indisputably better for being out of anxiety at last; but it was not change of air or ease of circumstances that had made Cynthia look as she looked at that moment.

"Now you see her in the daylight," cried Mrs. Meredith, who was as blind in her way as Dick was in his; "now you see what change has done for this young lady."

"Ah, change is good for everybody," cried Cynthia. "Well, have you two settled all your wonderful business arrangements?"

"Yes, darling, we have settled everything. Mr. Vincent is going to stay to lunch, and I have a great piece of news for you."

She looked up quickly at Dick, a sudden pallor overspreading her countenance. "Why, what has happened?" she asked, in a tone of apprehension.

"Oh, nothing disagreeable, dearest; nothing but that Mr. Vincent has come round to my way of thinking. He has quite come to see, darling, that it would be better if we go out to Santa Clara when he does."

"Oh, really. Why, what magic have you used to make him change his opinion like this?"

"I don't know that I have changed my opinion, Miss Cynthia," said Dick. "As I said in the begin-

ning, you will both be woefully disappointed with Santa Clara. You will have a very long and tedious journey, and you will suffer many and hideous inconveniences, but your mother will satisfy her mind, and, after all, that is an important item."

Cynthia laughed, the colour rushing back to her face again. "Mr. Vincent," she said, "to you who have been half the world over, it must seem very foolish that we should so persistently want this one thing. To you a long journey is a bore; to us it is a novelty and an experience; and the longer it is and the more fatiguing, the more thoroughly we shall enjoy it. Why, don't you remember the man in 'Punch,' in a third-class carriage between Edinburgh and London? He says, 'What a ghastly long drive it is!' And his fellow-passenger, a canny Scotchman, exclaims, 'Mon, the ticket cost one pun, twelve-and-saxpence. Ye need hae something for your money.'"

"Oh, yes, yes," said Dick, "I see your point; and as long as you are not disappointed, I needn't say that to me the presence of ladies at Santa Clara will be a joy. I told poor Roger, your father, often enough that you would come there and be perfectly happy." He dropped his voice so that Mrs. Meredith, who was speaking to the servant who had just entered, could not hear what he said.

Cynthia dropped her voice to the same level. "It is my mother's great wish," she said. "I have never known her so entirely set upon anything. She would have been wretched if you hadnt given way. Thank you very much, Mr. Vincent. You have been so good to us."

"Don't say that," he said; "the goodness is all the other way."

Then Mrs. Meredith turned her back towards them again, and the conversation passed into other and lighter channels.

It is hard adequately to convey the state of Dick Vincent's mind at this juncture. What he suffered was not less than torture. With every day, every hour, he became more and more hopelessly and passionately in love with Cynthia Meredith. There were times when he made up his mind that he would risk everything; that he would ask her to marry him; others when he felt that there was no help for it but making a clean breast of the whole story once for all; but, strange to say, so surely as he made up his mind that he would risk all and ask Cynthia to marry him, so did always that curious look come into her eyes which reminded him of her father. Of course it was a natural thing that the girl should resemble her father in some particular, and her deep, grey eyes were almost the only feature in which there was any likeness to Roger Meredith. Sometimes he would make up his mind that he would tell the mother and daughter that his was the hand which had sent Meredith to his last account; yet whenever he drew near to the subject, by some chance Cynthia always contrived to check him. That was pure accident, of course, and perhaps something to do with the fact that it was not, naturally, a very palatable confession for a young man to have to make. At such times he would feel that he had been a fool ever to think of upsetting their minds and their confidence in him by

saying a single word of what was not actually necessary to be told. "If I cannot stop her from going to Midas Creek," his thoughts ran, "surely something will happen so that she will not go ferreting everything out there. Perhaps it may not be the same landlord; perhaps we might go and not a soul recognise me or remember much about Meredith's death. It isn't such an uncommon thing for a man to get put out of the way like that. I don't suppose the affair made more than a stir of an hour or two; and evidently the jury sympathised with me, or they never would have brought it in 'Died by the visitation of God.' It was only their way of acquitting me of blame."

Then he tore himself away from Brighton, and went back to Hollingridge. That time he was fully determined that, somehow or another, he must break with the Merediths. Yes, he fully made up his mind that life at this rate was not worth living, and that anything would be better than the anguish of mind to which he was now subject.

"Going down to Brighton again?" said his mother, when eight or ten days had gone by.

"Yes, I must go down. I have rather important business. I shall be back in forty-eight hours."

He happened to meet Cynthia on his way from his hotel to the Merediths' lodgings, and at the sight of the speaking grey eyes, the quivering of the tremulous lips, and the heightening of the lovely rose-bloom on the face, it may as well be confessed that all his good resolutions took unto themselves wings and flew away.

He stayed two days in Brighton that time, going away more hopelessly in love than ever—more convinced that the marriage could not be, and that Cynthia was not for him.

"I am sure you are not well," said Mrs. Meredith to him on the second day.

"No, I am not very well," he replied. "It's nothing; don't worry about it, I beg."

So he went back to Hollingridge, where his mother was much exercised in her mind, and though she did not say a word to him, she several times confided her doubts and fears to Laura.

"I cannot tell what is the matter with Dick. I never saw anybody so changed in my life. He's like a person who cannot rest."

"I suppose," said Laura, "that he has been doing labourer's work for the last seven years, and now finds a life of ease and idleness almost intolerable."

"I don't think it is that," said Mrs. Vincent, "and yet I don't know what it is. There is something that we do not know anything about."

"Then, my dear mother, you may be sure that we shall never know," said Laura, wisely.

"He's in love; that's what's the matter with Dick."

"I don't think so," said Laura.

"I don't think; I'm sure of it. Now is it that Meredith girl, or isn't it?"

"He says she's very pretty," was Laura's remark.

"Yes, but I begged him to let me ask them here for a few days. I think it would be the only proper thing for me to do. He wouldn't hear of it. He

says they are ladies. The girl is very pretty. He seems to like them very much, and—and——"

"Well?" said Laura.

"Well, I'm looking ahead at the future a little."

"As how?"

"Miss Meredith is the heiress to half the oil well, which last year yielded a little over ten thousand pounds. Now it seems a pity to me, as she is young and pretty, and a lady, and Dick is unmistakably in love with her, that—well, that Dick doesn't marry her."

"Perhaps she won't have Dick."

"So likely!" said the mother, with dignified scorn. "Where has she had the chance to meet such a man as Dick?"

"Well, dear, it isn't quite that. Girls, especially when they are young, have their fancies—just as men have. Perhaps Dick has already asked her. He went down to Brighton and stayed two days."

"Well, he told me he should be back in forty-eight hours."

"But he wasn't back in forty-eight hours, dearest."

"He was only there two days. The question is, did Dick propose? If so, did she refuse him?"

"I don't know."

"I wish I could see the girl, then I should know in a minute."

"Well, dearest, perhaps it is just as well that you can't," was Laura's sensible reply. "Look here, mother, take my advice. Don't say a word to Dick."

"As if I should!"

"You might. Try not to think about it. Leave Dick to manage his own affairs by himself. If he wants the girl, you may be sure that he will do his best to win her. Meantime, it's no use asking other girls over, because Dick will have none of them."

"I know that," said Mrs. Vincent, ruefully.

And it was quite true. Dick absolutely declined to be fascinated by any of the young ladies in the neighbourhood of Hollingridge. They might be rich, or well born, or pretty, or charming, or possessed of any other desirable quality that young men look for in their wives; it was all the same to Dick, and before he had been at home a week he again took flight and his way to Brighton, this time fully determined that come what might he would not let "I dare not" wait upon "I will." He would make the horrid plunge, and put himself face to face with the truth, whether when Cynthia knew that her father had died by his hand, she would scorn him or not. He determined that he would break the news first to Cynthia, that if Cynthia took it in the wrong way he could quietly efface himself without paining her mother by the disclosure. He would leave it to Cynthia whether she chose to tell her or not.

It happened that he had some difficulty in finding a suitable opportunity. He did not choose to tell her in the lodgings, because they were never free from the chance of being interrupted by her mother. He planned out a long walk to some point of interest which would offer a feasible excuse for such an excursion. Yes, he would tell her then; and if she was upset, they would be on a quiet country road and

nobody would be the wiser if she gave way to emotion.

But alack and alas! it poured for the better part of three whole days; and beyond going to a concert at the Pavilion, to the theatre, and to one of the hotels to dine, neither Mrs. Meredith nor Cynthia ventured out of doors at all. Then, on the third morning, he received a telegram from his sister Laura:—"Father very ill. Fear hopeless. Come home at once."

CHAPTER XX.

THE OLD SQUIRE AND THE NEW.

As fast as rail could take him Dick Vincent sped home to the old house. He was terribly upset by his sister's telegram. He and his father had always been devoted friends, and the news that he was lying ill of what was probably a hopeless malady was very terrible to him. The journey seemed interminable—as journeys taken under such circumstances always do. He said to himself, over and over again, that of course in the face of such a message it would have been impossible for him to continue the confidence which he was about to make to Cynthia Meredith.

"Perhaps it is a sign that I ought not to tell her; that it would be better not to tell her," his confused thoughts ran. "If the dear old governor gets over this, I'll take it as a warning that it would be better not to tell Cynthia a single word of that episode. Perhaps it was only sent to me as a means of getting me away. I had better take it as a sign not to think of her any more."

But he did continue to think of her during all the rest of the journey; and at last the train steamed into Hollingridge station, and he thrust his head out eagerly to see if there was anyone who could give him news of his father's state. Almost the first person

that he saw was his sister Laura, looking anxiously up and down the station. He waved an eager hand to her, and she came swiftly along the platform to meet him.

"How is he?" he asked.

"Oh, just the same. Horribly ill."

"But with what?" he asked, as he bent and kissed her.

"Oh, a fit of apoplexy. He was all right this morning at breakfast, in fact he had been all round the stables pottering about just as usual. He came in to breakfast as brisk as a bee, and just as he was leaving the table he slipped and fell. Mother called out to him—she knew in a moment what it was. He just said, 'I am very ill. Send for Dick.' Of course they got him to bed, but he was unconscious then, and the doctor has been with him most of the day since. Dick, dear, he says it's quite hopeless; there's nothing to be done."

Dick turned his head away with a blurred mist in front of his eyes. "Will he know me, do you think?"

"I don't think so," Laura replied. "He hasn't taken any notice of anybody. He just lies there, feeling with his hand all over the bed as if he were searching for something; and now and then he'll seem to brush a fly off his face. Oh, it's dreadful, Dick—it's dreadful!"

"And mother?" Dick asked, in a choking voice.

"Mother? Oh, she just sits there holding his hand; it's heart-breaking."

"Do you think he'll know me?"

"I shouldn't think so."

It gave Dick a shock as they drove up the avenue to see that the house presented very much its usual appearance. The dogs were lying out on the broad steps, Laura's Persian cat was perched on the balustrade, the flowers all bloomed just as they had been doing for weeks, and the white lace curtains stirred idly in the evening breeze.

The old butler met him with a shake of the head. "Eh, it's a sad home-coming, Mr. Dick," he said.

"Yes, Charles. Is there any news?"

"No, sir, it's just the same. I was in there just now. If you could persuade the mistress to eat something. Do get her out of the room, Mr. Dick. If it was only a glass of old port and a biscuit, it would be better than nothing. I know cook's made some strong beef-tea. It may be days before the end comes."

"All right," said Dick.

He turned and followed Laura into the dining-room, feeling all at once cold and sick. It was horrible to hear Charles speak of the end in that tone of certainty.

"I'd advise you, Mr. Dick," said old Charles, following him into the room, "to take a nip of brandy before you go in to see the mistress; and then do try and bring her out, Mr. Dick."

"All right," said Dick, "I will."

He went into his father's room a few minutes later, and although the old man opened his eyes when Dick spoke to him, there was no gleam of any real consciousness in his face.

An old woman from the village, who had nursed the young Vincents as children, was standing by the

bed. "It's no use, Mr. Dick," she said, "he doesn't know you. He hasn't known anyone really since half an hour after he was taken. He'll never know anyone again."

"How long have you been in this room, mother?" Dick asked, turning to Mrs. Vincent.

"I don't know, dear. Ever since——"

"Come out with me for a few minutes; you can do no good here. Come, just for ten minutes."

With some difficulty she permitted herself to be persuaded, and Dick got her into the dining-room.

"I don't really want anything to drink, Dick," she cried.

"No, dearest, I know you don't want it, but you may have a very long strain before you yet. Don't refuse what will sustain and strengthen you. Charles has got some port up for you; it will do you so much good."

"If the mistress would be persuaded to have a cup of strong beef-tea," said Charles.

"No, I really can't."

"Well, you've had no lunch, have you?"

"Not a mouthful, Mr. Dick," said Charles.

"I daresay my mother doesn't feel like it, Charles. But she might take a cup of beef-tea. Come, darling, do. Think of us a little; think what it will mean to us if you are laid up also."

"Oh, I'll do anything you like, Dick," said his mother. "I never was stupid, and I wouldn't hurt poor dear cook's feelings for the world." She took the cup of beef-tea and drained it. "Yes, that is very good," she said. "It doesn't take an effort to get it

down. What, Charles? A little port? Oh, I don't mind."

"Come outside for five minutes," said Dick. "It's such a hot night, scarcely a breath stirring."

"No, not outside," said his mother, shrinking back.

"Well, just to the door. Let me put you a chair on the drawing-room veranda for ten minutes. You must think of yourself, dear."

"I don't like to leave him," said his mother, weakly.

"No, not to leave him. But old Goody is there, and if he wanted you or anything, she would come for you in a minute. It isn't like going out of the house. Just you get a breath of air, dear."

Eventually she suffered herself to be coaxed out into the veranda on to which several of the drawing-room windows opened, and there they sat for a few minutes while the soft summer shadows fell gently around them, and late afternoon wore into evening as softly, almost as imperceptibly, as the good genial life upstairs was wearing away to eternity.

"I must go back," said Mrs. Vincent at last.

Dick made no effort to detain her. He knew that she would in any case be the better for the change of air, and in truth time proved that he was right. Mrs. Vincent had need of all her strength, for several days went by, during which the squire lay in exactly the same state, breathing stertorously, but taking no notice of anyone or anything. Oh, the wretched time it was. Mrs. Vincent spent most of her time at the bedside; even she, in the end, suffered herself to be drawn away to lie down and rest under a distinct promise that she should be called at the slightest change.

Dick and the two girls wandered in and out of the house, saw visitors who came to make inquiries, and killed time as best they could, not liking to speak above a whisper, unable to settle to any occupation. And so the weary days dragged on and on, and on the fifth evening the change for which they had been watching came, and soon the squire was at rest.

To all it was a relief, although being excessively sultry it was terrible to be in a house of which the blinds were closely drawn. Then came four dreadful days ere that of the funeral, and a terrible ordeal in the fact that all sorts and conditions of men and women came to pay their last tribute of respect to the dead man.

There was a great collation after the ceremony, and Dick sat at the head of the table and realised for the first time that henceforth this was his own place. Then he had to bid adieu to everyone, to receive countless messages for his mother, and, most frequently of all, to reply to the question would he ever go back to California, or not?

"Yes, I must go back," he said several times. "I must go back, if it is only to settle things. Oh, there's no fear of my chest now; that's mended long ago. I shall be obliged to go back for various reasons; but of course my mother and sisters will be here."

"I wonder how long the mother and sisters will be there," said one country gentleman to another as they drove away. "He's a fine, likely-looking lad is Dick."

"Oh, yes, a very fine lad. Why, he must be getting on for thirty now."

"Thirty or odd, my dear chap. Same age as my

Tom. I remember his being born as well as yesterday. And poor old Vincent was sixty-five, so he was thirty-five when Dick was born."

"That's about it. Mrs. Vincent was young, you know. I don't believe she's nineteen years older than Dick. Never thought the old squire would have gone off like that, did you?"

"Oh, I don't know. He was getting very red in the face. He puffed a good bit as he came up the stairs at the Bench. I've noticed it several times."

"Horrid thing, apoplexy," said the other one. "Somehow or another it always seems to me as if it was in a measure your own fault. Did it ever strike you so?"

"Well, yes. You see, the poor old squire never was the same after he gave up hunting."

"Why did he give up hunting?"

"Why, something to do with the veins of his legs. Couldn't ride; and after being a hard rider to hounds all his life it didn't pay to take to doddering about. I'm sorry he is gone; he was a good sort, never a better."

Well might relations and friends alike regret the passing of the genial old squire of Hollingridge; but regrets, no matter how bitter they are, are impotent to change one iota of the workings of Nature. The squire was gone; his place would know him no more; he had pottered round the stables, and the glass-houses, and the grounds, and the place in which he had been born, and which he loved with all his heart, for the last time.

"Now, dear boy," said Mrs. Vincent the morning

after the funeral, "I want to have a serious talk with you."

"No, mother; it is not necessary."

"It's best," said Mrs. Vincent, briefly, "to begin as we intend to go on."

"Yes, dearest, but it isn't necessary to discuss that at present," said Dick, firmly.

"You are the master of Hollingridge now; you are the squire."

"I know it," said Dick. "More's the pity it is so; but you are the mistress. Please let me hear nothing more about it. I don't want to discuss it—there's nothing to discuss."

"But if you should marry——" began his mother, tremulously.

"Well, dearest, if I should want to marry, I'll come and tell you, and things will be made as convenient as possible for you and the girls. Believe me, I shall not spring a marriage on you, or anything else. Don't talk about changes; we've had one change, that's enough—more than enough for the present."

"I should like to know," began his mother—"I must know," she continued, in a desperate voice. "We must have some scale of expenditure agreed upon."

"Well, dear, I suppose that's necessary. It seems to me that what my father could afford, I can afford. You and the dear Dad have never lived above your income, and there can be no necessity or occasion to make any difference or any radical change now. For the present, what you have been accustomed to spend will be the proper thing to spend. Let everything go

on as it has done until some of us want to make a change. Winifred will be getting married by and by; well, that will be the first change; possibly Laura."

"Possibly yourself," said Mrs. Vincent.

"Well, possibly myself; but I think not. At all events, that is a contingency which has not arisen, or any prospect of it; so we needn't discuss it as yet."

"And you will go out to California?"

"I must go back, dearest, for a few months. I must arrange either for the proper working of the place, or for selling it. You must see that for yourself."

"Yes, yes, I see plainly enough. But you won't stop there now?"

"No, I shan't stop there. As ranching, it isn't worth it, and an oil well can be worked without personal supervision. Or I can sell. I must be guided by circumstances as to which course I take. But you may be assured of one thing—that I shall not stay a day longer than is absolutely necessary. I would not go at all unless it were a necessity."

"I certainly would not like to feel that you would go out there and remain another seven years."

"Oh, no, I should not have done if this trouble had not come upon us. After all, the place has served my turn. I went out with an awfully dickey chest, and now it's as strong as any other part of me. I shall never grudge the years I have spent out there; constitutionally they made a man of me; but for my pleasure—oh, thank you very much, I have had enough of it."

"If I were you, Dick," said Mrs. Vincent, "I would sell. Supposing your oil well dried up?"

"That would be awkward," said Dick. "I don't believe that oil wells ever dry up so soon as this. But I can't settle anything here on this side. I must do what I think is for the best when I get out there, face to face with those who are likely to want to buy."

"And in any case you mean to spend the greater part of your life at home?"

"The rest of my life, mother dear," said Dick.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD.

FOR a few days after the squire's funeral Dick Vincent did not set foot outside the estate of which he was now master. On the fourth day his mother came to him in the little room which had been his father's den.

"Dick," she said, "I have had such a nice letter from your Mrs. Meredith."

"Oh, have you?" He looked up and stretched out an arm to draw her down upon the sofa beside him, as boys who are on very affectionate terms with their mother often do. "She's a nice little woman," he said, "a dear little woman. And, you see, she's been in trouble herself."

"Her letter is very sweet," said Mrs. Vincent. "I want you to read it."

It was a sweet, sympathetic, womanly letter. "Your son," it said, "will have told you all the circumstances in which I lost my husband. How different to your own! You, who stayed so many hours by your husband's bedside, holding his hand to the last, cannot perhaps understand how I envy you. Bitter as your grief must be, you were together; I have always the anguish of remembering that my husband died with-

out knowing whether I loved him or not—even without knowing whether I was faithful or not. Dear lady, we do not know each other, except through your charming son, so good, so kind, so considerate. Indeed, you are blessed in him beyond all things. I hope to meet you one day, that I may tell you just how sweet and good your son has been to me."

"And you wouldn't let me ask them here, Dick," said Mrs. Vincent, reproachfully.

For a moment or so Dick did not speak. "Sometimes, mother," he said at last, "one is afraid to do what one is most anxious for."

"Then," said his mother quickly, and looking away out of the window in order that she might not in any way scare his confidence, "then your old friend's daughter is more to you than an ordinary girl?"

"She is everything to me," said Dick, under his breath.

"I should like to see her," said his mother. "I should like to have her here."

"No, I would rather you didn't. It is not at all likely, dear mother, that anything more will come—will—how shall I put it?—will come of our friendship."

"Do you mean that she doesn't like you?"

"No, I believe she thinks I am all right. She has never been other than perfectly charming to me."

"Ah, well, it's early days," cried his mother. "A pretty girl with a lot of money is not going to give herself away until the man has asked her. You must win her, my dear."

"We will see," said Dick. And a vision then of Meredith in his last tumultuous moments came before

him. "I would like to explain everything. I don't know how to put it," he said, in a rapid undertone; "I don't feel, somehow, that Meredith would approve. I have a very peculiar feeling about Meredith. It isn't her—I can't have you blame her for a moment—she is too sweet for words—but I do not feel that she is for me."

"There is something wrong about her?" said his mother.

"No, no. She is everything that is good and beautiful and charming."

For a moment his mother did not speak. Then, without looking at him, for she was a very wise woman in her way, she put her hand out and laid it over his. "Have faith in time, dearest boy," she said, "have faith in time. It works wonders."

The letter to Mrs. Vincent was not the only one which came from Brighton to Hollingridge. Both Mrs. Meredith and Cynthia wrote to Dick; Cynthia only once, it is true—a sweet, tender, girlish letter, which I may as well confess Dick carried next to his heart for many a long day. Mrs. Meredith, however, wrote several times: frank, friendly letters, such as Dick hailed with intensest satisfaction, because they gave him news of Cynthia.

During those few days Dick's mother, without seeming to in any way spy upon him, wormed a good deal of information out of him. She herself sympathised with Mrs. Meredith's feeling about going out to Santa Clara.

"Dear boy," she said one day, when they were sitting together on the wide old sofa in the study,

"it's a perfectly natural thing she should want to go out, if only for a few weeks."

"She cannot possibly stay longer than a few weeks," said Dick.

"I have always heard that California is so lovely."

"Yes, it is—certain parts of it, but not at Santa Clara. It's good enough, interesting enough; but it's far from civilisation, and I think ladies would be very unhappy there. Besides, they couldn't go out there and live with me, and I don't intend to live there any more, and they cannot stop there long. It's ridiculous and senseless their going; I know perfectly well it will be a most dreadful disappointment to both of them."

"Well, dear boy, let me ask them to come and stay here for a few days. Of course, just now, I couldn't have anybody excepting some one circumstanced as she is, in such deep mourning and your partner's widow and child. It would seem quite natural that they should come and see me before any of you go away. I might be able to persuade her to stop in England."

"Do you think you could?"

"Well, I might. I would try, since you wish it so much; but, all the same, I do sympathise with her in a way, Dick."

"Yes, darling, I sympathise with her, too, in a way, but not exactly in the same way. It isn't a place for women. If she had gone out to Meredith, Meredith would have spent a lot of money in putting things to rights. He would have got up some Chinese servants and a lot of furniture, and added a wing to

the house, and so on; but it wouldn't be worth doing now, and I am afraid she would be thoroughly disillusioned."

"Well, now, listen to me. I will write and ask her to come and spend a few days here, and if I can persuade her off the scheme, I will do it, because you don't want her to go. I think you would always be glad that we had done the right thing and invited them; and you would like to see the girl here before anything definite was settled between you; of that I am quite sure. See how she strikes you here with your own sisters, in your own home."

"She will never strike me any differently, mother," said Dick, "but since you wish it so much and are so kind about it, I will write and beg them to come when you ask them."

"Very well, dear, I'll write at once, because your time is getting within a limit now."

"Yes, I must start within a month. I ought to go a little sooner than that, if you could spare me."

"Dear boy, for business I must spare you," said she, quietly.

Mrs. Vincent went away then, thoroughly gratified at having obtained her own way. In her own mind she was perfectly sure, from the tone of Mrs. Meredith's letters, that she was as keen on keeping the oil well to one ownership as Mrs. Vincent herself. "Is it likely, a pretty girl with all that money, that she wouldn't feel it a perfect sin to let the other half of the splendid property slip? Of course not. Why, it would be no more nor less than a sin," her thoughts ran.

So by that evening's post two letters went from Hollingridge to Brighton; one couched in the most kind and friendly terms from Mrs. Vincent to Cynthia's mother.

"I am sure you will understand how much I desire to see you," she wrote. "It would be a great comfort to me if you would come and spend a few days with us here. As we are both in deep mourning, neither of us will feel the retirement of the other. My boy has told me a great deal about you and your charming daughter, and my girls are quite as eager to see her as I am to see you."

The other letter was from Dick to Cynthia. "I am writing to you because my mother is writing to yours to beg you to come and stay with us for a few days. I need not tell you how much pleasure it will give me if you accept her invitation." And as Mrs. Vincent had fully anticipated, by return of post came back a most pleasant letter from the little widow, saying that she and Cynthia would love to pay a visit to Hollingridge and to make the acquaintance of Dick's people.

Dick received the news with a certain pang of apprehension and regret, and yet—yet—every pulse in his body was stirred with a strange joy. He had quite made up his mind that in any case he must disclose the truth to Cynthia. Yes, it must be done sooner or later. Of course, he could not do it in his own house, that was impossible; but he would tell her, the evening before the day on which they would depart, that he was coming down to Brighton to see her, because he had a very serious communication to

make to her. That would prepare her mind for a disclosure; it would quite prevent his being put off by untoward circumstances. He would make the appointment to meet Cynthia, say up on the Rottingdean Road, before she left Hollingridge, so that they would not be dependent on any mood or fancy of her mother's. Yes, that was what he would do, and after that would come the deluge. When it was all over he knew that he would be happier, oh, yes. With a firm hand he would have shut down the curtain between himself and happiness; he would have gained in self-respect. It never occurred to him that possibly Cynthia Meredith might take exactly the opposite view to that with which he had accredited her, that she might say, just as the disinterested man who had witnessed the whole affair had said at the time, that he was in reality blameless, because he had only acted from an instinct of self-preservation. To such a contingency he never gave the remotest thought, and he drove to the station to meet the mother and daughter very much as a man might have driven to meet his fate upon the scaffold, feeling absolutely assured in his mind that the first time they came to visit his ancestral home would be the last.

It was naturally not in any sense a gay party that met round the table at dinner that evening, since both hosts and guests were in the deepest of deep mourning. To Mrs. Meredith Dick's mother took at once. She herself was large and fair and commanding, with an inclination to softness which meant that with a little trouble anybody who loved her could easily get round her. She admired with all her soul

the tenacity which she recognised in Roger Meredith's widow; she would really have loved herself to be a soft-voiced, velvet-handed woman with a will of iron. There was no iron in Mrs. Vincent's will; Mrs. Meredith's, on the contrary, was cold steel. With Cynthia she was charmed. Even against her own handsome, well-bred, intelligent, interesting daughters Cynthia showed up brilliantly. Her delicate beauty, her sweet, soft, yet direct manner, her dainty little ways, to say nothing of the oil well, all made Mrs. Vincent determined that, if she could help it, Dick should not throw away such an excellent chance of settling himself in life.

"The girl is over head and ears in love with him," she explained to Laura, when they were chatting the last thing that night. "What can he be hanging about for? Says he feels Meredith would not like it. Mrs. Meredith would like it, one can see that with half an eye."

"I shouldn't interfere with Dick's affairs if I were you," said Laura.

"Oh, I don't mean to interfere, but if a little judicious tact will help it along—well, Dick shall not miss a good chance for want of it."

She was very tactful and very judicious during the few days which followed. She devoted herself to Mrs. Meredith, and Mrs. Meredith was more than willing that she should be the recipient of so much attention.

"I shall call you Cynthia, my dear," Mrs. Vincent said to the girl during the course of the first evening.

"Oh, yes, please do."

"Well, it is rather early days, but you don't look like 'Miss Meredith' to me, and Cynthia is such a charming name."

"I should love you to call me Cynthia," said the girl, turning a vivid scarlet.

"You must let Dick take you to this place," Mrs. Vincent would say, or "Dick must show you the other. We old ladies will amuse ourselves very well, shall we not, Mrs. Meredith?"

"Oh, perfectly."

And so, having started the young people out on some excursion, the Meredith girls with veiled instructions to judiciously efface or lose themselves, as was necessary, the two mothers would go out for a stately drive, or sit toying with some bit of fancy work in drawing-room or garden.

"You like Hollingridge?" said Dick one day to Cynthia.

She turned her deep grey eyes upon him in wonderment. "Like it?" she said. "How could I help liking it?"

"Oh, you might not. Everybody doesn't. To me it is the centre of the world."

"You are very lucky," said Cynthia.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HAND TO THE PLOUGH.

IT was the very last day of Mrs. Meredith's and Cynthia's visit to Hollingridge.

"I am going," announced Mrs. Vincent at breakfast, "to drive Mrs. Meredith over to Foxborough to lunch. Who is going with us?"

"I can't go," said Laura. "I have my singing lesson at three o'clock. And Winifred won't be able to go, since she has such a bad headache."

"Then what about you two?" said Mrs. Vincent, looking vaguely across the table at her son and Cynthia.

Cynthia said politely that she would do just as Mrs. Vincent liked. Dick, however, distinctly demurred.

"Oh, do you much want to go? Do you like babies?"

"I don't mind babies," she said with a laugh.

"No, I don't mind babies in a general way; I rather like 'em. But Maud's baby—the last one—is a person that squalls. They ought to give him peppermint—or absinthe—or something."

"Oh, poor little thing, he's after his teeth," cried Mrs. Vincent.

"Is he? Well, I don't see why we should be after him. Don't go, Miss Cynthia—don't go. Stay at home, and when we have packed Laura off to her

singing lesson, I'll take you up to the very top of the woods. You get one of the finest bits of view in the country. You ought not to go away without seeing it."

"I'll do just what you like."

"Well, are you really anxious to see babies?" cried Mrs. Vincent. "No? Then we'll go alone. What do you say?"

"Just as you like," replied Mrs. Meredith. "I should certainly like to see your daughter's place. Yes, I should certainly like to see it. And I rather like babies, even when they are after their teeth."

So it was arranged and definitely settled. At twelve o'clock Mrs. Vincent and her guest drove away in state in the open carriage.

"I consider," said Dick, as he stood at the great entrance, watching the disappearing vehicle, "I consider that I got you out of that very cleverly."

"You did, dear boy," cried Laura. "It's the only subject, as we often tell my mother, on which she is absolutely—well, how shall I put it?—off her mental balance; and that's the grandson. He's a nice little kid as kids go, but it does get a little tiresome, I'm fain to admit it. Well, now, I suppose you two don't want me? You can manage to entertain each other, because I really must try over that new song of mine. I have done shamefully little lately, and Madame gets so cross when I am not up to the mark."

"Oh, we'll manage to amuse ourselves," cried Dick. "Come along, Miss Cynthia."

"Where shall we go?" said Cynthia, as Laura disappeared towards the music-room.

Dick turned and looked at her rather doubtfully. "It's blisteringly hot," he remarked. "Don't let us go too far."

"Well, wait till I get a parasol," she rejoined. "Then let us go just through the shrubbery—where that little stream runs by the garden and the park. I always think it's the prettiest bit of your whole domain."

He flushed up with pleasure at her words. She turned back into the hall and took a large black parasol from its place and announced that she was ready.

"I never saw anyone take so little time as you do."

"What, in the country?" Cynthia exclaimed. "I don't say that I should take as little time to get ready if I were in London, or even in Brighton; but here—why, one is always ready."

"Yes, I know; but not every young lady would think so."

"Ah! there are young ladies and young ladies," cried Cynthia; "and I am afraid my training has been never to waste a moment in unnecessary adornment."

As she spoke, she passed through the little gate which divided the west garden from the shrubbery.

"Few young ladies have so little need of it," said he, as he shut the gate again.

"Oh, you don't think that?"

"Indeed, I do think that. I am sure of it."

"Ah, you shouldn't say so. Flattery is so bad for one."

"Flattery? Did you think that I was flattering you?"

"I am quite sure that you were."

"No, no. I was telling you the truth."

"Ah, well, it isn't often the truth is so very palatable, Mr. Vincent. Now, isn't this delicious?"

She sank down as she spoke upon the mossy bank of a tiny rippling stream. The park beyond was green and fresh; the shrubbery behind was cool and still. "I always say this is the prettiest corner of your domain," she said.

"Wait till you have seen the top of the woods, that's pretty if you like." He settled himself down beside her on the bank as he spoke. "Do you know, Miss Cynthia, I'm awfully glad you didn't go over to Foxborough to-day."

"Are you? Why? Don't you like your sister?"

"My sister? Oh, yes, she's awfully jolly. But I like better to have you here."

"Oh, do you?" It was a trite remark, but it was the best that Cynthia could think of at that moment. "Is there anything like this in California?" she asked suddenly.

For a moment Dick did not reply. Then he began picking up bits of sticks, pebbles, and tufts of grass and throwing them down into the quickly running stream at their feet. "There are lovely places in California," he replied, "but none where Santa Clara is. Santa Clara has no beauty to boast of—none."

A sudden impulse came over him that now was the best time and chance he would ever have for telling her the hateful secret that was weighing so heavily upon him. "Miss Meredith," he said.

She looked up apprehensively. "Yes."

"I've got something to tell you."

"What sort of a something?" Her voice trembled, and so did the hand which was resting idly on her knee.

"Well, it's a very important matter. I have been wanting to speak to you about it for ever so long, and I think as we have got now so near to the time when we must—at least, the time when we have settled to take a long journey together—it would be better if I told you exactly what is in my mind, and then if you feel any differently towards me——"

She turned upon him with a delicate little laugh. "Oh, there isn't any fear of that. It's no use my pretending that—I don't know—what you——"

"Don't know what?"

"Well, what you are going to say."

Her eyes were downcast, a happy blush overspread her cheeks, and her hand toyed nervously with the fringed trimming of her gown.

For a moment Dick stared at her in incredulous amazement. Then he drew a trifle nearer her. "Cynthia!" he barely breathed the word.

"Well?" There was enough expressed in the word to have moved the heart of a stone, and Dick Vincent was no stone.

"Do you mean it?" he gasped.

She looked at him at last. "Well, it is so very wonderful? Have I known so many men like you that it should be wonderful that I—well, that you—well, that I like you?"

"Cynthia!"

In a moment he had forgotten everything—everything.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" he cried. "Do you really mean it?"

"I don't know," cried Cynthia, midway between tears and laughter. "I don't know that I said anything, or meant anything—but, oh, Dick, I am so happy!"

And then, somehow, Dick's arms stole around her and their lips met.

It was a long time before they came to their ordinary senses again.

"What will your mother say?" cried Cynthia.

"What will yours say?" replied Dick.

"Oh, well, as to that," with an arch laugh, "I don't think they will say much, because, you know, we are the twin halves of an oil well, aren't we?"

"Oh, hang the oil well!" cried Dick.

"No, no. An oil well must be a most comfortable thing. I know it has made all the difference in my life."

"But you would have loved me just the same if I hadn't had a penny?"

"Yes, Dick, if you hadn't had a single penny."

"You are sure?"

"Yes. I would have loved you just the same if you hadn't had a farthing."

"Dearest!"

They sat so long by the bank of the little stream that they forgot all mundane things until the sound of the luncheon gong came booming through the still autumn air.

"That's lunch," cried Cynthia, starting to her feet.

"Never mind."

"But we are late."

"Never mind."

"Oh, but what will they say? What will they think?"

"Who? Our respected mothers are gone to lunch at Foxborough."

"But your sisters?" she cried.

"My sisters? The girls? What will they think? I don't know. I don't much care; I don't care what anybody thinks as long as you are satisfied and content. Besides, what should they think? It will make very little difference to them. My mother has been worrying me to get married ever since I came home."

"Not really?"

"Of course, she has."

"To somebody in particular?" asked Cynthia, jealously.

"Well, no, I can't say that she has. Oh, no, don't worry about any of my people or what they will say. I'm a free agent, if ever there was one. You needn't have the smallest fear of my mother," said he, as they went quickly towards the house. "If ever a hostess gave a girl a fair chance, I consider that she has done as much for you."

"But you won't tell anybody?"

"We must tell them when they come in."

"But you won't tell your sisters?"

"Oh, no, no. We'll keep it for the mothers, and let them have the first news."

"That's all right," said Cynthia, with a sigh of relief.

All the same, the moment that Laura cast her keen eyes upon the pair, she knew instinctively what had happened.

"Well," she said, as they gathered round the table, "and what do you think of the top of the woods?"

"Oh, we've not been to the top of the woods. We've only been down through the shrubbery and round by the Skilpenbeck."

"Oh, I thought you were going to the top of the woods to see the view."

"Later on—later on," Dick said, "after lunch."

"I think the little bit by the beck is charming," said Cynthia, carefully avoiding meeting her future sister-in-law's eye.

"It is—isn't it?"

At this point Laura shot a meaning glance at Winifred. Winifred failed to understand, and sent a shaft of enquiry back by the same method of wireless telegraphy. Cynthia intercepted both looks, and blushed a furiously rosy red, seeing which Laura was wicked enough to laugh outright. She followed Cynthia into the drawing-room after the meal was over.

"Well," she said, "so you have made up your minds?"

"What do you mean?" asked Cynthia.

"Oh, the usual thing. You and Dick, of course. You needn't think I didn't see, the moment you came in, my dear—the moment you came in."

"Well?" said Cynthia.

"Well, I'm delighted. I think it would have been a great pity to divide the oil well, and you are too charming for any words to express. Not, mind you, that the oil well has had anything to do with Dick. I know Dick, my dear, inside out. I have never seen Dick look at a woman before. He exists for you."

"You think he does? You think he really cares for me? It seems so impossible."

"Why?"

"Oh, I should never make you understand. I have never been in the way of young men, of any sort of young men, to say nothing of their being like Dick. Do you think your mother will mind?"

"My mother? No. I think my mother will make you an excellent mother-in-law, and she will be very fond of her daughter-in-law and very proud of her. But remember I was the first one to wish you happiness. You know Dick and I have always been the chums of the family, far more so than any of the others, and so I shall expect you to be great friends with me, because I'm not going to give up my friendship with Dick because you and he choose to get married. Pray, don't think it for a moment."

"I should hope not," cried Cynthia, fervently. "I don't want to interfere with Dick's love for his people in any way."

"You can't help it to a certain extent," cried Laura. "But that is neither here nor there."

"And you think your mother won't mind?"

"I think she won't," said Laura, dryly. "I don't think anybody will mind. It's an ideal marriage, for

you are both desperately in love with one another, as anybody can see. I saw it as soon as you got here."

"What? Did I give myself away so much?"

"Oh, girls know, trust them. What makes it so ideal is that your old oil well is nothing but an adjunct—and it might have been the principal factor. Well, I'll leave you to your own devices without any apology. Winifred and I are going to drive into town to-day for various little things. Is there anything you want?"

"Not a thing, thank you."

"I daresay not. You'll have Dick to look after you. I wonder where he is now?"

It happened at that very moment that Dick was sitting in the den which he called his study. He was sitting in his father's great writing-chair at the carved oak desk which was the principal piece of furniture in the apartment. He did not look in all respects like a happy lover. He was resting his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands.

"There's no turning back now," his sombre thoughts ran. "God knows I had no intention to speak, to betray myself. She spoke out of the innocence of her dear heart; I can never say a word now. I have done it all unwittingly, and I must keep it up. I have put my hand to the plough; there can be no looking backwards."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ENGAGEMENT RING.

"I DON'T think," said Dick Vincent to Cynthia, when they had seen the girls drive off about their own particular affairs in the little pony cart which they called their own, "I don't think we will go to the woods this afternoon."

"No?" said Cynthia. "Why not?"

"Well, we've got other fish to fry. The mothers are safe at Foxborough, the girls have gone to Littlebourne; supposing that you and I, being left to our own devices, drive over to Newborough?"

"What is there at Newborough?" asked Cynthia.

"Well, there are shops," he replied; "jewellers' shops. I shall want to buy you an engagement ring."

"Oh, I should like to have an engagement ring," said Cynthia, very decidedly. "I don't know that I shall feel that I'm really engaged until I've got one. But won't you break it to your mother first?"

"I don't think so. I don't think that the occasion will necessitate any particular preparation in that way. Your mother may insist upon your leaving to-morrow, as was originally agreed. We had better make hay while the sun shines, and get our ring whilst we've got a chance."

"I don't mind," said Cynthia. "I should love it. How shall we go?"

"Well, you won't mind the dog-cart, will you?"

"Not the least in the world; it's all one to me. My experience of carriages has been very very limited, I assure you."

"Well, then, I'll order it at once. You'll put a coat on, won't you? Because it will be a little chilly coming back, and it is sure to be rather dusty."

"Yes, I'll put a coat on," she replied.

She went away to her room then and made some slight additions to her toilette, among them being a very smart coat of dark grey tweed.

It was between six and seven ere they turned in again at the lodge gates. Mrs. Vincent saw them come up the avenue, and she knew in a moment what had come about during her absence. She was a good mother, she had no second thought in her mind, none of the traditional "My son is my son till he gets him a wife" feeling, but she genuinely rejoiced that this beautiful girl should be bringing the other half of the oil well into the family property. She went along the veranda to the portico to meet them.

"Ah, my dears," she said, "no need to ask whether you have had a good time."

"The best of all times, mother," said Dick; "for I've brought you back a daughter-in-law."

"I was hoping that you might do so," said Mrs. Vincent. Then she turned and took the girl's hand in hers. "My dear," she said, "I won't say that I hope you will be happy, because I know that you will. A good son makes a good husband, and a good daughter makes a good wife. You two have always been good to your mothers, and you deserve happi-

ness, and you will certainly have it. Come, your own little mother is sitting round here. Let us go and break the news to her."

"Oh, Mrs. Vincent," cried Cynthia, "how kind you are! Are you sure that you don't mind?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure," said Mrs. Vincent. "I'm positive—certain sure. I have been, my dear, so happy in my life here, so pleased in every possible way, that I want my son to have as good a time as I have had. My dear friend," she went on, advancing to where Mrs. Meredith was sitting and laying her hands on the back of that lady's chair, "what you and I were talking of as a very desirable but remote contingency has come about. These young people have made up their minds, whilst you and I have been given over to baby worship. Come—say that you are glad; Dick and Cynthia are engaged to each other."

Mrs. Meredith jumped out of her chair, the liveliest expression of surprise upon her still pretty face. "No, you don't mean it? Oh, my dear children, I didn't dare to hope that you would make up your minds so quickly."

"Oh, I made up my mind ages since," said Dick.

"And I," cried Cynthia, "I didn't know that I had any mind to make up. I didn't know that Dick would ever look at me."

"Ah, my dear," cried Mrs. Vincent, "genuine modesty is a beautiful quality, as rare as it is beautiful. But now, my dear Mrs. Meredith, there will, of course, be no question of your going away to-morrow."

"Oh, I don't know," began Mrs. Meredith.

"But I know; I know. And Dick's time is getting

short now, and I suppose he will want to see as much of his fiancée as possible before he goes out again. Oh, you must stay a few days longer; I won't hear of any other arrangement."

Nobody being particularly anxious to suggest any different arrangement, the suggestion was not in any way disputed. The engagement was made public immediately. Mrs. Vincent told some of the elder servants, and intimated that in consequence of the deep mourning of the family no kind of demonstration was to be made. It was astonishing how very soon Cynthia took her place as one of the family, and Mrs. Meredith, who had for years been entirely cut off from association, that is to say, intimate association, with her own kind, found herself making all manner of plans for the future in conjunction with Dick's mother.

"When we have settled our children," said Mrs. Vincent, "you and I must go off on our travels and see what we can do to amuse ourselves. We are so nearly of an age, dear Mrs. Meredith, and our interests will be so closely joined that we ought to practically cast in our lot together. What do you say?"

"In a great measure I think it would be very wise," Mrs. Meredith replied; "but I shall not expect to be entirely cut off from my daughter."

"Oh, no, no; certainly not; no more than I from my only son. But I do believe in young people having their house to themselves, don't you?"

"Oh, I certainly do. But I think that I shall go to town and instal myself in a pleasant flat. We might if we each had our pied à terre, spend a great deal of our time together. It would be a most delightful

arrangement, unless indeed I should be so enamoured of California that I should want to stay out there permanently."

Mrs. Vincent's jaw fell. "To stay out in California? What, alone?"

"I might do so; more impossible things have happened. I have always had a desire to see that part of the world, always; and since my husband's death, I have longed more than ever to gratify my wish. I feel, somehow, as if it was my fate to go out there."

"After they are married," breathed Mrs. Vincent.

"I haven't thought about it since there was the idea of their being married. I want to go, and the sooner the better."

"Dick," said Mrs. Vincent that night, when she was going to bed, "come into my room for ten minutes; I have something to tell you."

"All right," was his muttered reply.

Accordingly, a few minutes later, he demanded admittance at her door.

"Come in, Dick dear," Mrs. Vincent said, "I want to ask you something. When are you going to be married?"

"As soon as I come back from California."

"But do you intend to go out there again?"

"Oh, I don't think so; not for ever so long. Why?"

"Do you know that Mrs. Meredith intends going out?"

"No."

"She does."

"I know she did intend going out," Dick replied.

"Do you want her to go?"

"No, I'd rather she didn't. It's no place for a lady. It's a beastly journey, very inconvenient and very fatiguing. I've told her so."

"But still, you consented to her going."

"I couldn't help myself, mother. She has a right to go if she chooses."

"She means to go out with you still."

"Oh, well, I can't help it. She must do as she likes. I'll talk to Cynthia about it. I wish she wouldn't, because I know they'll both hate it. And I should hate it, too—as much as I could hate anything connected with Cynthia. However, I'll talk to her about it."

"What I mean is this," said his mother. "It isn't that I mind whether she chooses to go to California or not; it's no business of mine, and I don't intend to make it so. Only you talked to me of your marriage coming off as soon as you got back. Now your marriage can't come off as soon as you come back unless you give the poor girl a chance of getting her clothes together. You can't order a trousseau now and trot off to California and find it ready when you come back again."

"No, exactly. I'll speak to Cynthia about it."

Accordingly the next morning he carried Cynthia off to the little stream by the corner of the park.

"I want to ask you something," he said, when they were safely settled down in their favourite hiding place. "Your mother is talking about going out to Santa Clara?"

"Oh, yes, dear; nothing will turn her from it," Cynthia replied.

"Oh, is that so? Well now, look here. To please me—to please me," he repeated, looking straight into his fiancée's lovely eyes—"to please me, darling, will you get her to give it up?"

"But I want to go," said Cynthia.

"And I don't want you to go," he said, in masterful tones.

"But why not?"

"Because—well, you know my old objections. It's a beastly journey; it'll wear you out; and if you go our marriage will have to be put off by at least three months."

"I don't see why."

"Well, you'll want clothes, won't you?"

"I can order them before I go."

"You can't get your frocks fitted and all that sort of thing if you are in California. I don't know what you women want, but I know when my sister was married our house became practically a draper's shop for the time being."

A rejoinder rose to the girl's lips that she was not one of his sisters, and would not require the house in which she might be living to be made into a draper's shop before she was going to be married. Then she suddenly remembered that she would be marrying into exactly the same position as his sister, and that whatever was necessary for his sister's social status would be necessary for the social position of Mrs. Richard Vincent.

"Yes, I suppose it will put off our marriage," she said.

"I am sure it will. Now we could well go out there

at some future time. If I go alone I can scurry through, see to all business arrangements, and be back again in ever so much less time than I can do if I have two ladies with me."

"I can't understand quite," said Cynthia, "why you should be so averse to our going out to Santa Clara; you have always been the same. Now if my father had lived you would have used every effort to persuade us to go out there permanently."

"For a very good reason," replied Dick. "If your father had lived he would have been at Santa Clara, making preparations for your comfort while I escorted you on the journey. He would have spent heaps of money, would have got in all sorts of things, and would have made a perfect bower of the place for you and your mother. As it is, I can't do a thing. I can't very well send out to the manager and say, 'Refurnish the house. Mrs. and Miss Meredith are coming out.' His taste is not your taste; he is a good sort in his way, but he has no idea of what two ladies like yourselves would want. Can't you see that?"

"Yes, yes, I see that plainly enough."

"If I could go out there first, and get everything ready for you it wouldn't be so bad; but then that would entail your coming out alone. As your future husband, I don't like it. Can't you see my standpoint?"

"Oh, I see your standpoint right enough; there's no mistaking it. But I also see mother's standpoint; and hers is that she has set her heart upon going out to see the place where her husband lived—I was going to say where he died—but that's another idea alto-

gether. She has certainly set her heart upon seeing Santa Clara, and I think, although she hasn't actually said it, that she has also set her heart upon going out to visit my father's grave. My dear Dick, you don't understand women; it's easy to see that you've never cared for a woman before me. If you had done you would know our ways better. Mother is living to go and see that grave; nothing else will satisfy her; even if it puts off our marriage it would be better to put it off a little while and let her gratify her whim—her caprice, if you like to call it so."

"Mine," said Dick, "is neither a whim nor a caprice. I don't like the idea of your going out to that wild part without any preparation, as if you were a mere nobody, in utter and entire discomfort, as you will do. Let us be married quietly—we must be on account of our mourning—then let us after a few months, say in the spring, take your mother out with us."

"Well," said Cynthia, "I'll see what I can do to persuade her."

CHAPTER XXIV.

HER OWN WAY.

WHEN Cynthia Meredith broached the idea to her mother that her engagement would, for the present, put a stop to any idea of their going out to Santa Clara, that little lady absolutely shrieked in her dismay and horror.

"Well," she said, "I've always known that young people in love were selfish, but I never came across anything so barefacedly selfish as for you and Dick to suggest that I should give up the very desire of my life just to please his vagaries. You can tell him that I shall do nothing of the kind. He can please himself whether he goes to Santa Clara or not—I am not in any way bound to him, of course, and he is not as yet in any way bound to me, excepting as my poor Roger's great friend—but you can make it quite clear to the young gentleman that I intend to carry out my original plan."

"He doesn't want you to put it off altogether, mother dear."

"No, he wants to get you safely married first; and then a dozen things might happen which would entirely preclude the possibility of taking a long journey to a country for which Dick himself has no predilection. Stay! you had better go and send him to me."

So Cynthia, who was as wax in the hands of her mother, obediently went downstairs in search of Dick.

"Dick," she said, "my mother wants to see you."

"Oh. About what?"

"Oh, well, dear, you may as well give up hope. Mother's mind is made up. She's going to Santa Clara, even though the whole world should combine against her. I believe if all the railroads were wrecked and the great lakes overflowed themselves and made an inland sea between New York and Santa Clara, mother would get to the other side somehow."

"Where is she?" asked Dick.

"She's in the boudoir next to her bedroom."

"Good. I'll go up."

Dick did go up. Mrs. Meredith received him with a radiant smile. "I know all you are going to say, my dear boy," she said, "but it isn't a bit of use. I know you are so much in love with Cynthia that you consider her little mother a brute to want her to take a somewhat out-of-the-way journey; but I was as much in love with my Roger as you are with Cynthia. You'll have your good time—all chance of mine has gone by for ever."

Dick gave in at once. "Very well, Mrs. Meredith," he said, "if you feel like that, of course it's useless for me to say anything. I confess I was thinking of your comfort and Cynthia's before anything else—believe me as to that."

"Oh, I believe you, dear boy; I believe you perfectly; but life is not entirely a question of comfort. I can promise you one thing," she went on, "I quite see, now that I have seen this charming place of

yours, that your Californian property can never be more than a mere source of income to you, and when I have been out and seen the place, I am quite willing to abide by your advice as to what I shall do with it. Surely, too, it will simplify matters for Roger's will if I am on the spot."

"Possibly it may do so. We won't say anything more about it, Mrs. Meredith. And I take it that you and Cynthia will be ready to start with me on the tenth of next month?"

"Yes."

When Dick left Mrs. Meredith's presence he went in search of Cynthia.

"Well?" she said, eagerly.

"Oh, it's no use," he replied. "Your mother has set her heart upon going, and perhaps, after all, it's just as well that she should do as she pleases. Certainly, when she has once seen the place, she will have no desire to stay longer, or ever to go again."

"And yet you stayed there seven years."

"For one thing," he replied, "I went there in bad health—at least, if not bad health, I couldn't stand an English winter. And then I put my teeth into the ranche and wanted to make it pay. It did pay before we struck oil, but even then it wasn't much to boast about. You know that we start on the tenth?"

"That is a fortnight to-morrow," said Cynthia.

"Yes. I have told your mother that it would be absurd for you to go back to Brighton. You may as well put in the fortnight here."

"What does your mother say?" asked Cynthia.

"My mother? Oh, we'll go and talk to her about

it presently. I suppose there'll be certain things that you'll want for travelling and for winter use, and you can as easily go to London from here as you can from Brighton."

Cynthia looked at him searchingly as he sat in the autumn sunlight. "Dick," she said, going closer to him, "are you very much upset that mother won't give way?"

"No, I wish she had, for her sake and your own; but since she is bent upon it, it is better that she should see for herself how right I am. Ever since she first proposed going out I have had a sort of instinct that not exactly harm would come of the journey, but it would be best that she did not make it. However, I have done my best to dissuade her, and I have not succeeded. So the only thing now is to let it go on."

"I wish mother had given in," said she, wistfully. "You know that I would have done so, don't you?"

"Yes, you had already done so."

"I don't think, Dick, that I shall ever want to go dead against you."

"I hope not. There is no reason why either of us should want to go one against the other."

"I feel," said she, "as if your mother will think us a perfect infliction."

"Don't feel that my mother thinks anything of the kind. She isn't a selfish woman at any time, and with regard to you and me, she has only a wish for my happiness; that counts with her first and foremost. Don't worry yourself about my mother, or think that you have worn out your welcome in these few days. Why, that would be a bad beginning. You are going

to live all the rest of your life in this old house; a few days more or less will make no difference to my mother."

"She is very sweet and kind," said Cynthia, in a trembling voice. "I feel as if I had come along and taken her one ewe lamb from her."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense! The one ewe lamb is on your side of the bargain. I might feel that, but I don't. I am going to make you a just perfect husband, and you are going to make me a quite perfect wife; and so our mothers will be happy—or ought to be, in knowing so much."

An hour later Dick knocked at his mother's bedroom door. "Are you there? Can I come in?" he inquired.

"Oh, certainly, dear. Come in. I was just resting for half-an-hour," she replied.

"It's a shame to disturb you, mother, but I wanted to have ten minutes' quiet talk with you. You know that Mrs. Meredith and Cynthia propose going out to Santa Clara with me?"

"Yes, you told me."

"Well, I didn't want them to go, and I want them to go even less now that I am engaged to Cynthia."

"Well?" Her tone was quite short.

"Well, it seems—I have been talking about it to Cynthia to-day. She is quite willing to forego her wish and to go out with me later on."

"Yes?"

"But her mother has set her very heart upon it. Nothing will induce her to change her plans."

"I suppose it is natural," said Mrs. Vincent, "but

I confess I should have thought more of her if she had given in to your wishes."

"And so should I," said Dick. "But she doesn't seem to look at it in that light at all; and so I have withdrawn my objection, and they will go with me on the tenth of next month."

"They will go with you?"

"Yes."

"I see."

"Well, naturally, there is no need for them to hurry away to-morrow."

"Not the least in the world. I hope they are not thinking that I am wanting to get rid of them."

"I don't think they've thought about it yet. I told Cynthia I knew that they wouldn't be in your way, but will you say as much to-night to Mrs. Meredith?"

"I will, dear boy, certainly."

"You had better not say anything about her having gone against my wishes in doing it. You see, I understand to a certain extent what she feels, poor little woman. She was parted from Meredith all those years, and I think she feels as if by going out to see the place where he lived for the last seven years of his life, she will bring herself nearer to him."

"I shouldn't dream of interfering in Mrs. Meredith's business, Dick," said his mother, with dignity. "I shouldn't expect her to interfere in mine. I think she is rather mistaken, because it is a very long and weary journey; but in any case it lies between her and you, and has nothing to do with me. I detest interfering in other people's business, and after all, poor little

woman, it's a natural thing that she should want to see the house that was her husband's home so long. Dick, did he really care for her, do you think?"

"Oh, yes; undoubtedly."

"But what an odd way he had of showing it. That way wouldn't have done for me, Dick. Fancy your father—your dear father—staying away from me for fifteen whole years."

"I couldn't fancy it," said Dick. "That was one reason why I always felt so horribly sorry for her, because I couldn't fancy it. Why, the dad would have died without you."

"Well," said Mrs. Vincent with a sigh, "he might have lived, dear, but not the kind of life that would have satisfied him. So you will always have to be a little lenient to your mother-in-law, dear boy, because she has missed so much."

"She is determined that she will miss nothing now," said Dick, with a short laugh. "However, that's neither here nor there. If you will ask them to make this their headquarters until we go, or during most of the time until we go, I shall take it as a great kindness both to them and to me."

"That I certainly will. And tell me, dear—when do you think your wedding will come off?"

"Oh, I suppose some time in the New Year—when we are back."

"Why don't you be married quietly in London before you go? Wouldn't it make things much easier?"

"Perhaps. But I don't feel—No, it wouldn't do. I'd rather not."

"Oh, very well, dearest boy. Of course, just as you like. I wouldn't interfere for the world. Trust me, I'll make it all right with Mrs. Meredith. And now you ought to go and dress for dinner."

Dick went off to his own room then. He pictured over all that had happened during the previous few hours whilst he was changing his clothes. So in spite of him, in spite of all his good resolutions, in spite of all his determination that he would resolutely refrain from saying the words which would tell Cynthia the true state of his felings, he was engaged to her. It had come about so simply and so naturally that he could not feel any mere surprise. It seemed to him as if he had always been her lover; as if they had been together from the beginning of the ages; and yet it was but a few hours since she had made a delicious mistake which had given her to him for all time.

Of course his mother, so sensible, so affectionate, so unselfish, had put her finger gently on the crucial spot of the entire situation. She had asked why he did not be married quietly before they left England? So he would have been—at least, so he would have tried to be—and he did not feel that either Cynthia or her mother would have gainsayed him—had it not been for that grim secret of his which he must bottle up in his own soul now and for ever. They say that down in the bottom of every heart still lingers some remnant of the original fetish worship to which we were all once addicted. Well, there was a little fetish set up in Dick Vincent's heart, which told him that although he could easily persuade Cynthia to become his wife, immediately if he wished, he would not be

doing quite honestly by her if he availed himself of that power.

But supposing that the journey to and from Santa Clara and the sojourn there were accomplished without any disclosures being made, he felt he might take it as an omen empowering him to go straight forward. He was not especially afraid of the journey either to Santa Clara or home again; nor was he in the least nervous about the time that they would stay at Santa Clara itself—although the ladies would, he knew, suffer a good deal of inconvenience. Still, he would write to Jack Frogg—no, he would telegraph to him at once, now that it was finally settled that they were to go, and would give him instructions to buy, beg, borrow or steal a sufficient number of things to make the interior of the house cosy and presentable.

That was all easy enough. What he was really afraid of was that Meredith's widow might insist upon going down to Midas Creek in order to see Meredith's grave and to have a talk with the landlord of the hotel in which he had died. If that should come about, Dick would, he knew, be cornered, and Cynthia or no Cynthia, he would have little choice but to tell Mrs. Meredith the exact truth, and explain to her all that he had so carefully been keeping back, both for her sake and his own. Because he could not possibly let a lady, still less a pretty woman, go down from Santa Clara to Midas Creek by herself; and were he to go himself as her escort, he would, to put it in his own language, "immediately give the show away." The question was—Would she forego the visit to Meredith's grave or not?

CHAPTER XXV.

ACROSS THE OCEAN.

HAVING once made up his mind that Mrs. Meredith was not to be turned from making the journey to Santa Clara, Dick Vincent resigned himself to the inevitable and discussed the various arrangements therefor with as little show of annoyance as if the idea of their accompanying him had been his own.

"I very much envy them their trip," said Mrs. Vincent the evening before they left Hollingridge. "I should greatly like to see an oil well myself."

"My dear mother," said Dick promptly, "you will, if you please, have to do without seeing this oil well. I can't help Mrs. Meredith going, although I'd give five hundred pounds this minute if she'd forego the pleasure. It's bad enough to have to take her—to know that she's going into the most extreme discomfort—that she will be hideously disappointed, and that anything may happen. I couldn't face taking another lady, especially one as little accustomed to roughing it as you are. Mrs. Meredith has had a very different life to yours, you know, dear."

"Oh, yes, dear boy. I confess I should like to go, but I know better than to set my heart upon it, or any nonsense of that kind. And then, of course, my reason would be one of pure curiosity; hers is one of sentiment—which is quite a different thing."

"Yes. It makes one almost wish that there wasn't such a thing as sentiment," said Dick, rather savagely.

He felt when he got safely into his own bedroom that he had done well to, as he put it, "choke his mother off straight." "If I had let them get talking about it," his thoughts ran, "and the mater had made up her mind to see Santa Clara, I should have had a pretty kettle of fish. 'Pon my soul, I begin to think there's nothing like being firm with a woman. I believe if I had been firm at first with Mrs. Meredith, she would never have insisted upon undertaking this ridiculous journey. However, if it was my fault through over-lenience, I've got to pay the penalty."

By the time that they left London and embarked on the great liner at Liverpool, Dick had grown so accustomed to the idea of Meredith's wife and daughter going to Santa Clara that he suffered no uneasiness, excepting when he thought of the possible visit to Midas Creek. Familiarity with danger breeds contempt; and so it did in this case. Mrs. Meredith, much to her own disgust and not a little to Cynthia's dismay, proved to be an exceptionally bad sailor. Between Liverpool and New York Dick did not so much as set eyes upon her. He heard from Cynthia that her mother had quite made up her mind that she would never cross the Atlantic again when once she found herself in Old England. "In fact," she told him, "I feel perfectly certain that if my father had lived, mother would have settled herself down in California and would never have gone back to England at all."

"That's all very well," said Dick, "but I hope she

won't take it into her head that it is a little earthly paradise and that old England is a played-out concern, because if she does I shall quarrel with her—which I have no earthly wish to do."

"Oh, of course, mother knows that you have a stake in the country. It's quite a different situation now," Cynthia exclaimed, "to what it was when poor dear father was living. Why, Dick, how can you be so foolish? Mother said if father had lived—if father had lived and you had chosen to marry me just the same, which," looking up at him coquettishly, "I suppose you would have done, it wouldn't have mattered in the least to you whether they chose to go on living in California, or whether they cared to go back to England and settle."

"No, no, of course not. I fully agree to that."

"Well, mother said 'if.'"

"Yes, yes, I quite understand; yes, yes—if. But, of course, poor chap, he isn't living; and so that's just the difference, isn't it?"

"Yes, that was what mother said. You are so unreasonable, Dick."

"I don't mean to be unreasonable," said Dick, with a pretty air of begging for forgiveness. "Why should I be? Only it's rather appalling, when one has brought a lady over here against one's will, to have even the possibility suggested that perhaps she'll never want to go back again."

"Oh, trust to your luck in that," cried Cynthia. "Mother will never want to come out here again. She wishes fervently that she had never come. She says she believes evil will come of it."

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised," said Dick, gloomily.

"Oh, wouldn't you? Do you think that it is possible you may see somebody else you like better than me?"

"I wish you wouldn't be so silly. How could I see anybody that I liked better than you? Haven't I been seven years in America? Did I ever see anybody I liked better than you? I wish you wouldn't talk such arrant nonsense."

"I'll try not to talk arrant nonsense," said Cynthia. "You don't know very much about women, Dick. You don't realise that when a woman is utterly and entirely and altogether happy, it seems to be part of her nature to talk arrant nonsense. I assure you, Dick, I never wanted to talk nonsense before. The people at Gatehouses regarded me as a most sensible young woman without a jot of silliness about me. It is you who have made me silly, believe me it is."

Mrs. Meredith did not come upon deck until they were within sight of New York, and then Dick was horrified to see the ravages which the voyage had made in her. She looked quite old, and very frail and transparent.

"You see I ought not to have come," was her greeting to him as he rushed forward and offered her his arm that he might steady her tottering steps across the deck.

"Well, I confess I didn't want you to come," he said very kindly, "but I never thought of this. So many people who are bad sailors in the Channel, think nothing of a trip across the Atlantic."

"I had always called myself a good sailor," she said.

"I wonder whether one could put one's self to sleep —to get back again."

"I am afraid that wouldn't be quite safe."

"If one took a sleeping draught every three hours it ought to keep one going."

"I hope you won't try it."

"Oh, I'll do nothing foolish," she said. "But I have felt the heat so much this summer, very much."

"That was because you would go to Brighton," said Dick, gently.

"Yes, the heat at Brighton was absolutely insupportable. If your mother had not invited us to Hollingridge, I believe we could not have stayed our time out. I have always suffered more or less from heat, but never so much as now; and coming on the top of that, this dreadful voyage has almost finished me."

"We ought to stay a few days in New York for you to recruit."

"I should like to do so if you don't mind," said Mrs. Meredith, quite appealingly. "I suppose it is an interesting city enough?"

Dick laughed aloud. "Oh, yes; you can well put in a few weeks in New York if you wish to do so, provided it is not too hot, which it should not be at this time of the year. Sometimes they get a spell of Indian summer—which is very trying."

"I hope not," said Mrs. Meredith. "I believe I shall die if there is anything like a wave of heat."

"In that case we mustn't stop in New York. We must get you down to Long Island, or somewhere where you can breathe. Then you'll find it cold

enough afterwards, cold enough to freeze the very marrow in your bones."

He felt genuinely sorry for the little woman. She seemed so frail and so dependent; and she so genuinely repented of having gone against his wishes in taking the journey at all. Dick could be very generous, and he was just as kind and considerate then to Mrs. Meredith as he would have been had she made the journey entirely to please him.

In due course they landed, and thankfully shook themselves free of the big ship; at least, Mrs. Meredith certainly did. She could not repress a shudder as she stepped across the gangway. It was a shudder of disgust to think that before she could reach her native country again she must spend seven more cruel days on that or some other vessel. "Then," her thoughts ran, "old England shall be good enough for me. I wouldn't like to tell Dick so, not for the world; but oh; how flattered he or any other man would be if he knew how often and how bitterly I have repented of ever leaving my native shores."

She would have been considerably surprised if she could have known how thoroughly Dick realised her exact feelings.

New York proved itself a veritable city of delights. Its restless stream of life, its extraordinary vitality, all appealed to the little woman who had for years been living a life of hated stagnation. Nobody but herself knew, not even Cynthia, how she had loathed her surroundings in Gatehouses, how she had raged within herself at the kindly and perhaps a little patronising visits of the vicar, how she had fumed over the more

ceremonious calls of his less tactful wife, how she had longed and prayed that Roger might one day come back again and enable her to let these people see that, after all, she was perhaps even better than their equal. And then, as soon as the news came that she was comparatively rich, her instinct had been to get out of Gatehouses at once; she had no longer any desire to shine among those who had been witnesses of her past humiliations. She did not want her daughter to pose as an heiress before those who had, not unnaturally, regarded her as a "young person." So the vivacious, restless life of New York fascinated her beyond what any words of mine will express, and in order the more thoroughly to observe it, she set herself industriously to do the city and its environs.

It was hot for the time of year, but not extraordinarily so, and therefore Mrs. Meredith was enabled to gratify her love of sight-seeing to the very full. Dick was appalled at the energy with which she attacked her task, and the interest with which she carried it through.

"I had no idea that your mother would be like this," he said one afternoon to Cynthia, when Mrs. Meredith had at last acknowledged that she was feeling a little tired, "but why waste it on New York? If she had gone to Paris, or Dresden, or Munich, or to Italy, I could have understood her enthusiasm; but I can't understand anybody enthusing about anything in America."

"Why not?"

"Because America is not a place to enthuse over. Barring the Falls, which can be done in a few hours,

it is a place to pass through—a place to do business in, a place to seek your fortune and all that sort of thing, but not to enthuse over."

"Oh, well," Cynthia cried, "mother knows that she will never come back here again, and so she wants to see all there is to be seen while she's about it."

"That's right enough, but if she goes on like this she'll knock herself up properly. She ought to have stayed here quietly and rested; eaten her meals regularly, taken a drive every morning and afternoon, and then have gone leisurely on and have saved up all sight-seeing until she was on the way home."

"Oh, well, you must let mother go her own way. I am content to be guided by you, but mother must go her own way. Sight-seeing pleases her, therefore let her see sights. And mind, to-night she is not going out; we are none of us going out; we are going to do nothing more exciting than perhaps take a ride on that elevated railway."

Dick fairly groaned. "Not for a pleasure trip? Oh, my dear child, do you know what I wish?"

"No."

"Well, I wish that your mother had belonged to a peripatetic circus—a sort of tent arrangement that sets itself up every three days and then, having exhausted the money of that pitch, goes along to another pitch. Then if money had come to her, she would have been content to sit still and enjoy it."

Cynthia looked at him with a world of fun shining out of her soft eyes. "I believe they call that a 'fit-up show,' don't they? Fancy mother in a fit-up show. It's too funny! Well, Dick, dearest, I am really sorry

that my mother is not more domesticated than she is, not more like your own, that you can keep in proper order, but as she is, so you must take her or leave her. I am afraid that she's going to make the most of this trip, because she feels perfectly sure that she'll never take another; at least, not one that entails a seven days' sea journey."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A NEW IDEA.

"I THINK," said Mrs. Meredith one evening at dinner, "that we have about done New York."

"I should think you had," said Dick, with a grim smile. "And you may think yourself very lucky that New York has not done you."

"How done me? I don't understand you, Dick."

"Well, that this fearful heat has not completely knocked you up. Considering all that you have done and seen, the little care you have taken of yourself, the excited state in which you arrived, and the amount of hard labour that you have put in since you have been here, I can only say that you must have a constitution of iron."

"I have an excellent constitution," said Mrs. Meredith, who, if she perceived the sarcasm did not think it worth while to notice it, "far better than ever my daughter will have, so you may make up your mind to that."

It was on the tip of Dick's tongue to rejoin "I hope so," but he nipped it off just in time, and dropped a piece of bread in his mouth to serve as an excuse for having opened it.

"I must say," Mrs. Meredith went on, "that I have enjoyed my stay in New York very much. It's a fine city; there's a sense of life about it. I don't know,

if I were not, so to speak, tied elsewhere through you two, that I wouldn't sooner live here than in any other city I have ever been in."

"I can't understand your taste," said Dick. "I think New York perfectly horrid myself. However, these things are all a matter of opinion; but since you have done New York, Mrs. Meredith, without New York having especially done you, I suppose you will be moving on soon?"

"Yes, I think there is nothing left to stay for now," said Mrs. Meredith, quite seriously. "We might go on to-morrow. What do you think, Cynthia?"

"Oh, yes. Do let us get out of this horrid heat," cried Cynthia.

Something in her voice made Dick turn and look at her. "Do you feel ill, dearest?" he asked.

"No, Dick, but I don't feel well. I never could stand dreadful heat, and it has been very oppressive to-day. Do you know, I think I shall go to bed directly after dinner. If you two want to explore the elevated railway, you can explore it without me."

"Don't you think, Mrs. Meredith," said Dick, "that it would be as well to leave one world to conquer?"

"How?"

"Well, you are coming back by way of New York. How would it do to leave the elevated railway till we are coming home, and spend one evening resting ourselves?"

"Yes, I don't mind," she said.

"But I shall go to bed all the same," announced Cynthia, "because my wretched head is getting worse every minute."

Dick looked at her again very anxiously. "I hope you are not going to be ill?" he murmured under his breath.

"No, no, no; only a headache. Too much sight-seeing—too much done-up-ness. I am not strong like mother."

"Thank God for that!" was Dick's fervent inward comment.

"Then we'll go on to-morrow, Dick," said Mrs. Meredith.

"Very well, I'll find out about the trains presently."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Meredith, "that we can get everything on the cars for whiling away the tedium of the journey?"

"Oh, yes; as much as the tedium of such a long journey can be whiled away," Dick replied.

"Yes, I suppose it is tedious."

"Yes, it is very tedious; at least, I found it so," said Dick.

"And what day do we arrive at Midas Creek?"

"Midas Creek!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yes, of course. We are going there first."

"Going to Midas Creek first?"

"Of course. That's the main reason why I have come."

"Oh."

He happened in his consternation to glance at Cynthia, who looked so white and so suffering that he proposed, without further continuing the conversation, that they should leave the table.

"The sooner you are in bed, Cynthia," he said, "the better."

"Yes, I know. I feel awfully played out to-night. You and the mother can settle about the journey," she said, as they passed down the room.

"I'll go up and see you safe into bed, darling," said Mrs. Meredith.

"And I will go and have a cigarette," said Dick.

He left them at the elevator, and turning went into the smoking divan, where he sat down and tried to think over the appalling suggestion which Mrs. Meredith had just made to him. He no longer wondered, fond as he had been of her, that Meredith had left her.

"It looks such a velvet glove," his thoughts ran, "but what a hand of steel—cold steel, chilled steel—with velvet covers. She's made up her mind to go to Midas Creek to worry everything out—to make a holy show of herself there. Oh, —— it all, I must stop it somehow! I must manage somehow to make her go to the ranche first. She'll be pretty sickened by the rough time there; and then I'll take her down to Freeman's Rock, and when she has seen the charms of that place she perhaps won't be so keen on taking Cynthia to a place which everybody will tell her is simply ten times as rough. At all events, if she goes to Midas Creek, she must go without Cynthia. Her father's grave is nothing to her, and I strongly object to my wife, until she is my wife, visiting any such part of the world. And then," he added, with a resolute expression crossing his face, "once she is my wife, I'll take care to keep her out of that kind of thing."

He finished the cigarette and then went up to the sitting-room which was attached to Mrs. Meredith's

suite. He sat there alone for a few minutes before she entered from the bedroom.

"Oh, you are here," she said. "I am sure that poor child will be all right when she has had a night's rest. She has done a little too much."

"A great deal too much, Mrs. Meredith," said Dick.

"This heat is so very trying," she remarked.

"Yes, it is." Then he got up and went and sat down opposite to her. "Mrs. Meredith, I want you to do me a favour."

"Certainly, Dick, if I can."

"I want you to go straight to Santa Clara."

"Oh, no."

"Well, but I have a good reason for saying it; it would be better on all accounts that you go to Santa Clara first. I should strongly object to Cynthia going to Midas Creek at all."

"But why?"

"It isn't the place for a girl of her age or her exceptional looks."

"She will be perfectly safe with me," said Mrs. Meredith, putting up her chin with a haughty gesture.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Meredith, but I happen to know the part of the country where we are going to, and I tell you that Cynthia is not going to Midas Creek with my consent. As her future husband I object to it very strongly, and I do think that my wishes should be considered in some degree."

"It's natural that Cynthia should wish to visit her father's grave."

"Not at all. If you will excuse me saying so this once, Roger was nothing to Cynthia beyond the bare

fact that he was her father. She has no remembrance of him; she has no special interest in him except as he affects you. I am not saying this to hurt you, Mrs. Meredith, but believe me that I am right. Cynthia must not go to Midas Creek."

"There is no reason why she shouldn't go," Mrs. Meredith persisted.

"There is every reason why she shouldn't go. The most important is that her future husband objects to it."

"But how can I go if Cynthia is to be left behind? Where is she to be left?"

"That's easy enough. If you go to Santa Clara, and we get our business through with regard to the property, I can arrange for somebody to take care of Cynthia while I take you down to Midas Creek. You are making a mistake, Mrs. Meredith; you had better take my advice and stop away. It will be a black and bitter disappointment to you. You will hear things said about Meredith which will hurt you beyond what any words of mine can express. He didn't bear the character of a saint at Santa Clara; he wasn't a popular man anyhow. At Midas Creek you will hear what will hurt you: you will hear nothing that would be in any way a satisfaction to you. As to the six feet of earth that covers him, what difference is there between one patch of ground and another? My wish is to spare you pain, and if you believe in me at all you will be guided by me in this respect; if you don't believe in me, well, you don't; and you must go your own way, although it isn't the right way. Still, if your mind is bent upon it, I'll take you down to Midas

Creek myself, and I'll stay with you; but I will not allow Cynthia to go near the place."

For a moment Mrs. Meredith sat irresolute. Dick, watching her keenly, saw by the tightly held in under lip that she was torn by a dozen conflicting emotions.

At last she spoke. "Dick," she said, "I generally have a very great respect for your opinion. You have a clear, level, business head, and I have gone very much by what you say, partly for that and partly because you are my dear Roger's great friend. But, Dick, when you tell me, or when at least you imply that I am not a sufficient protector for my daughter in California, or any other part of the world, I consider that you insult me."

"Oh, Mrs. Meredith, there can be no question of insult between you and me," he said quietly; "you must know that that is the wish furthest from my thoughts; you must know perfectly well that I can have no object but your comfort and Cynthia's ultimate good when I beg of you to consider my wishes in this one respect. My dear lady, Meredith himself was so conscious of the wildness of the life to which he had grown accustomed by living in it for fifteen years, that he would not allow for a moment that should I find you, as I did find you, you would ever consent to come out and share it. He naturally remembered you as he had left you, and he felt that you would instinctively shrink from many things which had become the habit of his daily life."

"But you have been seven years in this same place, living this same life," persisted Mrs. Meredith, "and I don't find that it has made any difference to you.

I don't see that you are any different to your family. You are still the young man of good family who has been in a cavalry regiment. I don't find that you have been degraded by having lived for seven years at Santa Clara."

"No," said Dick, "you may not find it; but you would have seen a difference in Meredith."

"I don't understand you, Dick."

"I mean simply this. Look here, Mrs. Meredith, I'm going to speak this once straight and plain to you, and then, if you please, we'll never touch on the subject again. I went out to California on account of my lungs; I went out with money from my father, with sufficient to start me in a decent way of living, and from time to time my father supplemented that start by further help. Mrs. Meredith, from first to last of the whole seven years that I have spent in this country, I have lived the same clean and wholesome life that I was accustomed to live before I came here. Meredith did not follow the same course. He had been out eight years when I first met him; he was then a broken man—broken in pocket, broken in character, broken in constitution. We chanced on each other; we chanced to become friends, and I was the drag on the wheel of Meredith's passions which kept him alive and in something like decent condition until I had no longer any hold over him. Meredith knew life in California better than I did, better than you can ever know it; but, Mrs. Meredith, I know sufficient and I have seen sufficient to make me sure of one thing—that you will make a great mistake if you go to Midas Creek and you will regret it all your

life if you seek to identify yourself there as Meredith's widow."

For a moment Mrs. Meredith was too much astounded to reply. "You mean to tell me," she exclaimed, "that if I went there as my husband's widow I should not be safe?"

"I don't mean that you would go in danger of your life," said he, "but you would certainly not be safe from insult for one thing. You would go with a deep feeling towards Meredith, too—the feeling of nobody that you would meet. Remember that Meredith died raving mad drunk. If you went to Midas Creek and you spoke of him to anyone who ever came in contact with him during that last few days as you spoke of him to me, that is as you have thought of him all these years, your hearers would laugh in your face. They might not even stop at that much."

"It wouldn't be necessary for me to say I was Meredith's widow," said she.

"Well, if you were to speak of him to anyone in Midas Creek without revealing your identity, you would hear what, as I said before, would hurt you more than any words of mine could tell. There's nothing to be gained by it, Mrs. Meredith, nothing. Believe me, you had better let well alone."

The moment the words had passed his lips he realized that he had made a mistake. Mrs. Meredith sat looking at him with a new light shining in her blue eyes.

"Dick," she said, in a curiously hard, strained voice, "what do you mean?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

NOTHING MORE.

FOR a minute or so Mrs. Meredith sat staring at Dick Vincent as if she would look into his very soul.

"Dick," she said, "you have put a new idea into my head. What did you mean when you said that it would be best to leave well alone?"

"I have been trying to explain what I meant," he said deliberately.

His heart was beating more quickly than usual; he felt that some suspicion had been aroused in her mind. Any sort of revelation might take place during the next half-hour, and he nerved himself to meet what might be before him as only a strong man in perfect health would have been able to do.

"Look here!" she said, ignoring his remark. "I insist upon it that we stop at Midas Creek—I mean that we go there first. I have a reason—a very urgent, a very cogent reason."

"Not with Cynthia."

"Yes, with Cynthia."

"No, Mrs. Meredith; I will not give my consent."

"Your consent is not necessary. Cynthia is not your wife yet, but Cynthia is my daughter, and she will go where I tell her. That will be to Midas Creek."

"I shall appeal to Cynthia."

"You can appeal to Cynthia if you choose, but Cynthia will do my bidding. Cynthia has never disobeyed me in her life; she is not likely to begin now. Cynthia is going to Midas Creek with me; you can please yourself whether you go or not. I shall not conceal myself, or the fact that I am my husband's widow. What there is to learn about my husband's death I will learn."

"What more can you want to learn than you already know, Mrs. Meredith? You have seen the account of the occurrence in the local journal."

"I want to make sure," she said, looking at him fixedly, "that my husband was killed."

He gave an exclamation of impatience. "My dear Mrs. Meredith, this is worse than folly. If you have any idea that Meredith, poor fellow, is still alive——"

"No, I have no such idea. I know that my husband is dead, but, and the question is a large one, was he killed or was he murdered?"

"He was killed," said Dick, shortly. "You have the evidence in the papers. You can have no better proof than that."

"Yes, I can have better proof than that. I can have the proof of the man who was there and saw it done—the landlord of the hotel."

"His evidence is there in the paper."

"I would prefer to have it from his own lips. How do I know that the editor of that paper was not paid to produce that report?"

"My dear Mrs. Meredith, this is absolute folly," said Dick. "Folly!"

"Perhaps. If it proves so, I am content to abide by it. You take things too much for granted over in these wild parts of the country. I will not do so. I have been robbed of my husband," she exclaimed, working herself up into a fury, "and I will have satisfaction. I will know the truth. You got the news in New York; you came on."

"What was the good of going back?"

"You came on; you left him to his fate. You didn't care."

"What was the good of caring? The man was dead."

"You don't know that he was dead."

"Yes, I do."

"How do you know? By the paper?"

"No, I had a letter from a man who was present, a man I know."

"What was his name?"

"His name is Valentine Clegg."

"An American?"

"Yes."

"You knew him?"

"Oh, yes."

"And he wrote and told you my husband was dead?"

"He wrote me the whole circumstances of the affair."

"Why didn't you show me that letter, Dick?"

"Because there was a good deal in it that I had no wish for you to see."

"Why?"

"I have already told you, Mrs. Meredith, that Mere-

dith did not carry a very good character about with him. His reputation in California, such parts of it as he was known, was a bad one. I should not like you to read—being Roger's widow, and I knowing him as I did, knowing the good there was in him—I should not like you to read everything that Valentine Clegg said about him. He had known him for many years—almost ever since he first came out."

"I should like to see that letter."

"I am sorry I cannot show it to you."

"Why?"

"Because I have destroyed it."

"Why did you destroy it?"

"I destroyed it because I then could not show it to you."

"Did this Valentine Clegg justify the action of the man who killed my husband?"

"Absolutely. Nobody could have done otherwise. It was a question of life for life, and the man who had his senses about him did not see being shot down by the man who was raving mad drunk. It's no use shirking the truth, Mrs. Meredith, and, as I told you, it is less than no use for you to go to Midas Creek, either in the character of an avenging spirit or, for the matter of that, as Meredith's devoted widow."

"Where does this Valentine Clegg live?"

"Mrs. Meredith, it is not necessary to tell you."

"Yes, I will go and see him."

"No, I don't think you must go and see him."

"I intend to do so. Give me his address now."

"No, I shall not give you Clegg's address. From what he wrote to me he could hardly be called staying

in the hotel, as he had not been there more than five minutes when the affray took place. He wrote me from the standpoint of a purely disinterested eye witness. It can do you no good to see him. Look here—I'll send to Midas Creek for the entire evidence, which I am quite sure I can get you. That will be as worthy of credence as if you went and collected it yourself, because I shall get it from the official quarters."

"No, I'll have it at first hand. I'll go to Midas Creek, and then I'll go to see Valentine Clegg. I shall get his address from the hotel. You are shielding somebody."

"Mrs. Meredith!"

"Yes. I am not the least excited; I am speaking with an absolute knowledge of what I am saying. It's borne in upon me with an insistence which I should be a wicked woman to disregard. I am quite calm, but I am convinced that you are hiding something from me. You are shielding somebody; you know more than you have ever told me, and if you will not tell me the truth, I will seek out those who will."

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Meredith was most horribly excited. She was trembling like an aspen leaf from head to foot; her face was white, her lips were strained, and her voice was hard and repressed even to monotony.

"So," she went on, "it's no use trying to hold me back and bar my progress any longer; it's no use to speak to me of Cynthia; Cynthia will go the way that I go. The truth I will have. If my husband has been done to death, his murderer shall suffer."

As Mrs. Meredith grew more excited, so did Dick Vincent become more absolutely calm. He was past all personal feeling now. He was playing a game as a game; he was playing it desperately in earnest, for the issues to him were more important than the issues of life and death. He was playing a game of "pull devil pull baker," between Mrs. Meredith's angry suspicion and the chance of Cynthia being his wife. And he played for all he was worth.

"You forget," he said, very quietly, "that you are speaking of a country which is not England. You would get no redress, you would get no fresh inquest, you would not even get sympathy. The jury, probably made up of hard-headed, rough and ready men, considered Meredith's death a pure accident, and in order to express their feeling in that way they brought the verdict in—'Died by the visitation of God.' If I had been the foreman of that jury, or indeed an ordinary juryman, I should have suggested that they would better have expressed their feeling by returning a verdict of 'accidental death'; but, you see, I was not there, and, therefore, they followed their own ideas and returned the verdict as you know. As to my shielding anybody, as to my hiding something, well, if you like to think so, you must. I have no objection to taking you to Midas Creek; I only object to my future wife going near that place. I have asked nothing unreasonable of you; I have only asked you to take that journey when you have seen the ranche; and you are not acting reasonably by me when you do everything you can to thwart me, when you go against my fixed principles as regards my fiancée, when you

accuse me of something for which you have absolutely no grounds."

"You dare to say this to me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Meredith, I dare to say this. And I shall dare to say a good deal more before we have done. It takes no such great daring."

"Then I shall go to Midas Creek without you, and I shall take my daughter with me. If you like to give my daughter up——"

"There's no question of my giving your daughter up; I shall never give your daughter up, excepting at her own wish. And I defy you—I dare you to say one word to influence her against me. If you do, Mrs. Meredith, it will be a trial of strength between us, and although Cynthia may have been the most perfect daughter in the world, she has given her word to me, she has given her love to me, and I am convinced that she will abide by my wishes, because her common-sense will tell her that they are more reasonable than yours."

Mrs. Meredith got up from her seat. She stood, holding on to the table beside her, staring hard at him and swaying unsteadily, as if her head were in a whirl.

"You think," she began, "you think that you can hoodwink me, but you will find your mistake."

She pointed a trembling finger at him, and then, without a word of warning, without a sigh, a gasp, or an attempt to save herself, she dropped like a stone at his feet. Dick, with an exclamation of intense annoyance, stooped and raised her from the ground. He was vexed with her; he was vexed with himself. She

seemed a dead weight in his arms, and he carried her to the nearest couch, where he laid her down, then flew to the electric button, ringing three times as a signal to one of the chambermaids to come to him.

"Quick! this lady is ill!" he exclaimed, when the maid arrived. "Can you get me some brandy? Stay! Perhaps Miss Meredith may have some. She has gone to bed; she cannot be asleep yet."

The maid, who was a Swede, stooped down over Mrs. Meredith, and took the cushion from under her head. "It is ze best to put ze head low," she said in a tone which re-assured him, because it told him that she was not flurried at Mrs. Meredith's state. "I go see if the young lady has brandee."

A moment later she came back, carrying a small silver flask and a glass from the toilet table. She was immediately followed by Cynthia, who had thrust on a cambric wrapper above her nightdress.

"What is the matter, Dick?" she said. "Is mother ill?"

"Yes, she has fainted. Have you ever seen her like this before?"

"Oh, yes, I have sometimes. Yes, that's right, Brincka, the lower the head, the better. Rub the palms of her hands. Now, Dick, a little of this brandy —Oh, don't weaken it with water, just a few drops will be enough to begin."

Thus bidden, Dick Vincent forced a few drops of brandy down her throat. There was no effort to swallow, and the liquid ran out of the corner of her mouth on to the cushions of the sofa.

"I think," said Cynthia, still rubbing hard at the

palm of one hand while the Swedish maid did the same with the other, "I think we should do better if we could get a doctor here. This sort of thing needs ether. There must be a doctor near to a big hotel like this, possibly one living here. Her pulse is so slow, and she scarcely seems to breathe. Wait a minute, I'll get some scent."

But it was all of no use. Brandy, scent, doctor, daughter, nothing had any effect upon the inanimate form lying upon the sofa. A doctor who happened to be occupying the next suite came quickly in. He took but one glance at the sofa, touched the wrist, bent down and listened a moment to the heart, then turned to the maid and said "Give me a looking glass."

Cynthia dropped her mother's hand, went swiftly into the bedroom and brought back an ivory hand-glass. She had no idea why he wanted it; all this was an absolutely new experience to her. She watched the doctor with wide-open eyes, in which curiosity was the main expression, as he held the glass over Mrs. Meredith's lips. Then he took it away, looked at it, and glanced markedly at Vincent.

"Are you this lady's son, sir?"

"I am going to be her son-in-law," said Dick. "This is her daughter."

The stranger turned and took the girl by the hand. "My dear young lady," he said, "it is better to tell you the truth at once. We can do nothing more."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TERRIBLE WEEK.

WHEN the doctor uttered those words to Cynthia Meredith—"We can do nothing more"—she looked at him with eyes which unmistakably showed that she had not in any way taken in the full meaning of his words.

"I have never done more than given her a little brandy," she said, looking anxiously at him.

"You don't understand," he said. "It's no use giving her brandy. It is too late to do anything."

"I don't understand you," she said.

At this moment Dick took the girl's hand. "Dearest," he said, "you don't realise what the doctor wants to tell you. He means that you have only me now; that we must be everything to each other."

"You don't mean that my mother is dead?"

"She is dead," said the doctor, simply.

Dick was holding her two hands fast within his own. He expected a terrible outbreak of grief, but Cynthia was absolutely calm.

"Are you quite sure?" she said to the doctor, and then looking down at the quiet face of the dead, "Are you sure that nothing can be done? Won't you try to do something?"

"There's nothing to be done," he said. "Your

mother is dead. She was, of course, subject to these attacks?"

"Oh, sometimes. I have known her faint, not very often, but never so long as this. You are quite sure?"

"I am quite sure."

For a few seconds the girl did not speak. She stood looking down on the sofa with a blank face. "You were quite right, Dick," she said, at last, looking up at him. "You said she would kill herself."

"With what?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, she was ill all the way over; yes, very ill. The doctor on board said she ought not to have come. And then she couldn't rest; she wanted to see everything; and the heat was so great; she was so energetic, so determined to make the most of her time, and nothing we could say made any difference. She utterly fagged herself out."

"Ah, it's a pity. Her heart must have been in a state necessitating a very quiet life. I shall, of course, be able to speak more definitely later on. What a pity it is when people take their holidays too hard and make a toil of a pleasure."

"Well, I did my best," said Dick; "in fact, I was trying to persuade her not to take a very disagreeable and arduous expedition when she was taken ill. However, it's no use to talk of that now; there must be a great deal to arrange. Cynthia, I am sure that you would be better in bed. I ought to find somebody to stay with you to-night. Miss Meredith," he continued, turning to the doctor, "does not know a soul in the country; and I not a single lady in New York."

The doctor did not hesitate for a moment. "Oh, that's easy enough," he said. "I'll fetch my wife here. Come into the next room," he added to Cynthia; "I should like just to run my eye over you."

He drew her into the adjoining room and listened a moment at her heart.

"Your heart's all right," he said. "I'll bring my wife to you. I think they had better transfer you to a room next to ours, and she will look after you for the night."

He had closed the door of the room where Mrs. Meredith was lying, and made a sign to Dick to follow him into the corridor. "She will be better when she has had a good burst of crying," he said in an undertone. "She is a good deal run down. Has she been sight-seeing too?"

"Yes, she has—until she absolutely rebelled this evening, and refused to do any more."

"I see. What's her name?"

"Oh, Meredith. Miss Cynthia Meredith. You know that she is engaged to me."

"I gathered as much. With her mother's consent?"

"Of course. Oh, yes."

"Father living?"

"No, he isn't. He and I were partners on a ranche together in California. We were on our way to settle up his affairs."

"Well, my dear sir, it's a pity you didn't get married before you left England. That poor little woman in there has really driven herself to death from what I can gather from a cursory examination. However,

I'll go and fetch my wife. By-the-bye, what is your name?"

"Vincent—Richard Vincent. Thank you a thousand times. I really don't know how to thank you enough. You see, I'm so frightfully stranded, being left like this, and if she breaks down at all, I shan't know what to do with her. It's awfully good of you."

"Oh, it isn't a bit. My wife will be delighted; she's the kindest creature living. I daresay she'll be able to do more with her in five minutes than you and I would in a week. And then we must have a talk as to all that will have to be done. You have a very unpleasant week before you."

"I know it," said Dick. "However, I must go through it somehow."

It was but the work of a few minutes for Doctor Sergeantson to go back to his own suite of rooms, acquaint his wife with all that had happened, and enlist her services for the girl who was so suddenly bereaved of her only living relative.

Mrs. Sergeantson was a warm-hearted Irishwoman, impulsive, quick, and intensely sympathetic. She never attempted to stand upon ceremony, but rushed into Cynthia's room as if she had known her all the days of her life.

"Oh, me poor child! me poor dear child! How can I find words to tell you how grieved and sorry I am for the dreadful trouble that has fallen upon you!" she cried.

Cynthia, who was sitting by the open window, staring at nothing, looked round with a half-vacant stare.

"You are very kind," she said. "I don't think that I quite realise what has happened yet. It's all been so sudden, so——"

"Yes, me poor child, I know perfectly well. You are stunned, poor darling. But you shall not stay here in this room by yourself. Come and stay to-night with me. Come to my suite. You shall share my room to-night, and we'll turn the doctor into the room next door. Come, me poor dear, you can do no good here, and you can't stay here brooding by yourself."

Some note in the sweet Irish voice or in the touch of the tender hands made Cynthia realise, as nothing else had done, the terrible loss which had befallen her. She caught her breath with a sob for the first time since they had called her from her bed.

"Oh, why should you be so kind to me?" she asked.

"Sure, me dear, because although I never saw you before I've got a heart that can ache for anyone that's in trouble. But you must cheer up. The doctor tells me that you've a fine young man that's going to be your husband, and so you won't be as much alone in the world as if you were left all by yourself. Ah, here's Brincka. She's a good sort is Brincka; she's a great friend of mine. Come now, Brincka, if I take Miss Meredith off to me rooms, you'll bring all her things, won't you,—there's a good girl?"

Mrs. Sergeantson well understood the art of getting what she wanted by the soft methods of persuasion. Brincka, who was genuinely sorry for the great blow which had befallen Cynthia, readily promised to transfer all the young lady's belongings to Mrs. Sergeantson's apartments.

"Now, me dear, you can leave it all to Brincka," cried Mrs. Sergeantson. "She's as clever as daylight, and as kind as they make 'em. Come straight along with me, there's a dear. There's nothing to be gained by staying here, and the sooner you lay your weary head on your pillow and get you to sleep, the better."

"I don't feel as if I should ever sleep again," cried Cynthia.

They were just about to leave the room when an idea struck Mrs. Sergeantson. She stepped aside and spoke to the Swedish maid, who whispered something back in reply. Then she turned back to Cynthia. "Me dear," she said, "you'd like to go and take your last look at the little mother? She'll not be the same to-morrow perhaps. Go and say good-bye to her now. It will comfort you afterwards, and I'll go with you, and then I'll be the better able to talk to you about her."

"Yes," said Cynthia, "perhaps it will help me to realise it."

Mrs. Sergeantson looked into the adjoining room. "There's no one there," she said. "They'll wait until we've cleared out of the road."

The dead woman was lying upon the couch where she had breathed her last, a light sheet being thrown completely over it.

"Sure she was a pretty creature," said the Irish woman impulsively, "and you are her living image. Poor dear! poor dear! It's sad to see her like this. And yet me husband said she couldn't have suffered a pang."

In a moment the floodgates of Cynthia's grief and

sorrow were opened. She flung herself down upon the floor by her dead mother's side. The Swedish girl impulsively ran towards her, but the doctor's wiser wife touched her with a warning hand and shook her head.

"Not a word," she said; "I have been waiting for this. It had to come sooner or later."

The Irishwoman was very kind and tender and considerate to the forlorn girl. She encouraged her tears; she tended and ministered to her; she took her away to her own cheerful room and waited upon her as her mother had never done.

So, knowing that she was in good hands, Dick was left free to make all necessary arrangements with Doctor Sergeantson and the authorities.

At best it was a hideous week which followed. The formalities which are necessitated by sudden death were all got through in due course, and as soon as possible all that was left of Cynthia's mother was laid quietly away to rest in one of the graveyards of the city to see which she had sacrificed her very life.

"And now," said Mrs. Sergeantson to Dick, when they were all once more assembled in the doctor's sitting-room, "now what is going to happen?"

"Mrs. Sergeantson," said Dick, "you can believe that during the past few days I have been thinking that question out with my whole heart. Under the circumstances, so unexpected, so tragic, I do not see that we have before us but one course."

"And that?"

"That is that Cynthia and I should be married immediately here in New York. I know dearest," he

said, putting out his hand to her, "that this is sudden, but we have been in circumstances which leave us little or no choice. We both thought to wait a few months and to go back and be married in England in the midst of our relations, but here we are, several thousand miles away from anybody belonging to us, alone with each other, alone saving for the doctor and his kind wife, as alone as if we were on a desert island. Now, having come so far, it would be ridiculous to go back without completing the business for which we came across the Atlantic. I hold your father's will; I also hold your mother's will, made just before she left England. You have seen my mother and my people; you know that you will be absolutely welcome to them whether you go back as Cynthia Meredith or as my wife. It will simplify everything if we are married now. We can then go to Santa Clara without any difficulty. We can wind up your father's estate, we can arrange what shall become of the ranche, and then go back to England to take up our life together in the home which would have been yours in any case after a few months. What do you say, Mrs. Sergeantson?"

"Sure, I think it is the very best plan that could possibly be," said the doctor's wife.

"You have no fear that your mother——?" began Cynthia.

"My dear, I have no fear of anybody," he replied. "You know perfectly well that my mother was delighted when we announced our engagement to her; she was delighted. To her you are the ideal daughter-in-law. I suppose," he said, turning to the doctor,

"that there will be no great difficulty in arranging for a marriage to take place as soon as possible?"

"Oh, there are a few formalities to go through, of course—the same as in any country; they are, if anything, fewer here than at home. Anyway, the wife and I will be delighted to keep Miss Cynthia with us."

"Don't call me Miss Cynthia," Cynthia broke in, pathetically eager to show how she appreciated the kindness which had been lavished upon her.

"Well, I won't. I don't feel, although we have only known you a few days, I don't feel like a stranger to you. We shall be delighted, Vincent, to keep Cynthia with us until she is safely your wife. I think you are perfectly wise, and everybody concerned—that is to say your mother and your sisters; nobody else will matter—will certainly agree that you had no other course open to you. Then you can go along on your journey, get through your business in your own time, and stay a few days with us on your way back."

"And then," said Dick Vincent, holding out his hand, "our greatest desire will be that you and Mrs. Sergeantson should come and stay with us at Hollingridge."

CHAPTER XXIX.

DICK'S WAY.

IT is an easy thing to get married. All the great epochs of life, those about which we are accustomed to make the most fuss, may be accomplished without any fuss at all. How easily some people die! Quietly, unobtrusively, like guests who wish to slip away without spoiling a party, some people lay down the armour of life and slip so gently away out of our midst that we hardly miss them until they are actually gone. So, in spite of the fuss that is usually made about weddings, it is quite possible and easy to be married without any fuss at all; and with the help of the doctor, who had proved himself such a good friend to Dick and Cynthia, the two were married in the Church of the Strangers at New York one day early in November.

Any feeling that Cynthia might have had of being married in a corner, of having in a sense run away to be married, was quite dispelled by a cable from her future mother-in-law, to whom Dick had at once cabled the news of Mrs. Meredith's death and his intention of marrying Cynthia without delay. "Deeply grieved," it said. "Fully approve." So it was with what you might call the skeleton of a maternal blessing that the two went, accompanied by the doctor and

his wife, to the Church of the Strangers, and were made one; and when they had celebrated the event by a quiet little feast together, they set off on their long journey towards Santa Clara.

It was not until then that Dick Vincent permitted himself to breathe freely. It is difficult to explain his feelings at this time. His first sensation, when he realised that Mrs. Meredith was dead, had been one of actual horror; his next of care for Cynthia; and this had been speedily followed by a feeling, which would not be shaken off or got rid of, that he had been mercifully delivered out of a terrible situation; that he had been spared a near chance of losing the only girl he had ever loved—the girl who loved him with all her heart and soul. He knew that if Mrs. Meredith had ever accomplished her wish and got to Midas Creek, she would inevitably have discovered everything; she had been so plainly and unmistakably on the right track. And he knew, although no real blame could be imputed to him even by her, that all chance of happiness for him would have been at an end for ever.

Cynthia, after the first few days, had recovered wonderfully from the awful shock of her mother's death. It is so much easier to get over a loss when one is in the midst of strange scenes, when one's life is full, and one's heart has an occupant which for the time is sufficiently enthralling to push every other interest to one side. So, by the time they started on the first stage of their journey which would eventually bring them to Santa Clara, Dick was feeling that at last he could allow himself to be utterly happy. And

Cynthia—well, with Cynthia happiness took the form of breathless gratitude to think that Dick, so handsome, young, well-born, straight and clean and wholesome, should have fixed his affections upon her. It was extraordinary. Of course, she gave the credit of it all to that mysterious fetish which we call Providence. "And the best of it is," she said to him, as they waved a last adieu to the doctor and his wife, "you would have cared for me just the same if I hadn't had a penny to my fortune."

"Perhaps even a little more," corrected Dick.

"Well, you might. But I don't altogether believe in that; at least, I don't like to think that under any circumstances you could have liked me better."

"You are quite right, child; I couldn't. Only 'like' is such a wishy-washy word for what I feel for you."

Well, they spent a couple of weeks dawdling along the road to that part of California in which Santa Clara was situated, and at last they arrived at the mansion which Dick had painted in such unpromising colours to his fiancée's mother.

Cynthia was openly, frankly, childishly disappointed. "Is that the place?" she asked. "Not those sheds?"

Dick laughed. "Yes, that is the mansion."

"But, Dick, there must be a house somewhere."

"That is the house."

"Oh!" Her tone was redolent of the intensest disappointment. "Oh, what would poor mother have thought of it?" she exclaimed.

"I told her what to expect."

"Yes, dear—yes. But you never gave such a pic-

ture of—Oh, well, I don't know how to put it, but it's like a cattle shed. I expected to see a long, low, white house with a piazza, and hammocks, and easy chairs, and lots of plants and flowers, and all that sort of thing. It's a sort of lean-to without another side to it. Dick, how could you stay here for seven years?"

Dick Vincent laughed. "Well, you know, dearest, I didn't care tuppence about the prettiness of the place—or perhaps I should rather say the nonprettiness of the place. I had set my teeth into it, and I intended to make it pay. It's all very well if you can buy a fancy ranche in a picked quarter, then life on a ranche may be very nice; but here, where you have to start from the beginning, where you never see a decent soul from year's end to year's end, only those that are playing the same game as yourself, some succeeding and some making the most hideous failures, there is something very grim and extremely unpleasant about the whole thing. But mind you, we made it pay before we struck that oil well."

"I am sure you did," said Cynthia, with an adoring glance at him. "But what pluck you must have had! You had dear Hollingridge with all its beauty ever in your mind; you knew it would be yours one day, even though you didn't like to think about it. How could you put up with this?"

"Oh, well, one gets used to things. After all, one only lives one day at a time."

"Do you get used to things?" said Cynthia. "I don't believe it. Do you know, Dick, I never got used to being a teacher in a village school? You

might say, 'Oh, that's nonsense! Her mother was always poor; she had known nothing better. She was not like a person who had lost a big position within her memory.' I don't believe it makes a bit of difference; if you are not congenial to the life you are in, you never get used to it. There only comes a time when you don't mind it. If I had gone on till I was ninety teaching those wretched little stupid children, I should always have hated it just the same."

"Yes, yes. Because you were utterly out of your natural sphere; that is understandable enough. But in a case like this, where you are working for an end —and I had two ends to work for, for I wanted to buck my lungs up and I wanted to make the show pay—one puts up with things, discomforts, all the rest of it, as a means to an end. But, dearest, we'll not stay here a day longer than is necessary to wind up affairs. It will be comparatively easy, but it will take some weeks. Do you think you can be happy here till we are through?"

"Oh, Dick, I can be happy anywhere where you are. Why, I shouldn't mind living here altogether, so long as I had you. It isn't what I expected, no. I suppose hardly any strange place is quite what one expects; I have never seen one yet that was."

But with all her cheerfulness and all her love Cynthia did not in the smallest degree take any different view of Santa Clara. "Poor mother!" she said, over and over again, "how disappointed she would have been. It's almost as well, Dick, that she didn't live to come here. She would have hated it all. Even if my father had lived she would never have

been happy here. She loved prettiness, daintiness, comfort and convenience—just as she loved flowers and the sunshine. Hers was a most luxurious nature, although, poor dear, she had to do without luxury all the best years of her life."

"If your father had lived," said Dick, "it would have been by no means a sine quâ non that your mother should make Santa Clara her permanent home. You forget that he would have been able to live in any part of the world that he liked, just as you and I are going to do. For my part, and with all my heart, child, I wish that they had both lived to come together again. It was equally hard on the man who had toiled for years and years, trying this scheme and that, taking first this road and then the other, to have everything go wrong just when he had grasped the prize. Life is very hard for some people; I think of it every day; and it was harder, perhaps, for the woman who had waited all the best years of her life, only to find too late that the man she loved had been faithful to her and had loved her to the very end. I feel, child, as if I must try to make you happier than the ordinary run of women; as if I should in a way so make up to your mother for the happiness that she missed. But we will go home, dearest. I don't feel, now that I have come back again, like holding on to any responsibilities in this country. I'd rather realise everything and go home, and live our own modest, contented life at Hollingridge. There is no especial happiness in great wealth; one's first feeling is—Well, here's an oil well worth ten thousand a year. If we know ten thousand is coming in we

shall insensibly creep up in our expenditure, enlarge our ideas, and then if anything were to happen—I mean if the blessed well were to dry up—we should have to cut down everything, which would be horrid. But if we realise it all now we can invest our money in good English securities, and we can regulate our expenditure accordingly. What do you think?"

In truth Cynthia was so disappointed with Santa Clara and all connected with it, that she was ready to agree to anything that seemed good to her husband, and Dick therefore regarded the eventual disposal of the ranche as a settled thing and only a question of time. But neither in America nor in any other country wherein laws exist and take effect can the wills of two persons be duly arranged for and carried out without a certain amount of delay. Christmas had come and gone before Dick Vincent was in a position to begin negotiations for the disposal of the ranche. Cynthia was terribly disappointed that they were not able to spend Christmas at Hollingridge.

"If you knew," she said, in one letter to her mother-in-law, "what an isolated life I have lived, I who have not one relation in the world, you would understand how I yearn to be with you at this time. But this tiresome old ranche is still on our hands; not that it is likely to stay on our hands, for oil wells always fetch their price, but it has not changed owners yet, because Dick could not, although he pushed the lawyers as hard as he could, get affairs settled so as to be able to set about selling Santa Clara."

"Dear little thing," said Mrs. Vincent to Laura, "she didn't in the least want to go out there. It

was her mother's insistence that carried that point. Dick hated their going. How much better it would have been if they had stayed quietly here with us, or divided their time between us and Brighton, and let Dick go and arrange everything. I hate women who want to go and poke their noses into everything."

"Well, she got married," remarked Laura.

"Yes, she got married, that's true—but what is that? She missed all the wedding presents."

"Oh, I don't suppose the wedding presents would have counted for much, as she hasn't a relation in the world. And we shall all give them wedding presents just the same," Laura cried.

"Ah, yes, that is so; yes, that is so. Well, my dear, I don't like to say anything unkind, and it isn't nice to speak ill of the dead, but really I think Dick won't be any the less happy because his wife's mother chose to have her own way in this instance."

"If Dick isn't happy with that sweet little wife," said Laura, "then he deserves to be unhappy."

"And if anybody," said Mrs. Vincent in quite a severe tone, "deserves to be happy throughout the rest of his life, it is my dear Dick. No, Laura, I am not partial. I always feel with regard to you children that I am not partial. Dick's as good as gold and as straight as a die."

"I wasn't saying anything against Dick, mother," said Laura with a smile.

CHAPTER XXX.

DISILLUSIONISED.

THE sojourn of Dick Vincent and his wife at the ranche of Santa Clara was but another rendering of the old saying, "All things come to him who can afford to wait." In time even the most intricate legal matters will arrange themselves, and when they are clearly, concisely and simply laid down in black and white in the shape of a will, the time of waiting is not very long. It seemed long to Cynthia because she yearned for the dignity and comfort of an English home. To Dick the time seemed positively to fly. He was so happy, so absolutely satisfied and content with the wife that he had chosen, that he did not really care whether they stayed at Santa Clara a few months more or less. He had remembered to take up from New York a box of odds and ends of things which would, he felt, transform the place into something more like the semblance of a home than he had left it. He had written to his manager, Jack Frogg, to see if he could not get up certain articles of furniture from the next town, and among them was a little piano, which had once belonged to a young English bride, who had gone out full of hope and joy and had not survived the ennui and misery of life on an isolated ranche until the anniversary of her wedding day came round again. When all these extras had been ar-

ranged and put in their places, the "mansion," as he always called the house on the ranche, represented to him as good a home as anybody in California need desire. But Cynthia, although she was more sweet and more companionable and delightful than even his fondest dreams had imagined her to be, never for one moment accepted Santa Clara as anything but a temporary abiding place.

"No, dear," she said one day, when Dick proposed to buy in some more furniture from a neighbouring sale, "it isn't worth while. What we have will do for us very well as long as we are here. What is the good of burdening ourselves with a single chair more when we have got Hollingridge waiting for us at home?"

"One would think," said Dick, putting his arm round her and looking fondly down upon her, "that Hollingridge was your childhood's home, not mine."

"Ah, it's women who value houses and homes," said she, wisely. "I don't suppose your father cared half as much for Hollingridge as your mother did; and I am sure—yes sure, Dick—that you don't think a quarter as much of it as I do. This is all so much waste time. How soon do you think we shall be able to start?"

"Well, if all goes on all right, we shall be able to start towards the end of the month. But you would like to see San Francisco, wouldn't you?"

"San Francisco? Oh, no, Dick. When we have thoroughly satiated ourselves with Hollingridge, with little spells of London in between, we'll go to Rome and to Munich. I have a great desire to see Munich; and I would like to see Dresden very much. But San

Francisco, no. I daresay it is very beautiful; I think I have always heard so—the 'Golden Gate,' isn't it? But I don't think we'll stop any longer out here just for San Francisco. You have seen it, of course?"

"Oh, yes; I have been there several times."

"Then you don't want to see it again?"

"Only for your sake."

"Ah, then for my sake we will go home. We will go home and make much of Hollingridge. But Dick, you didn't tell me that you had sold the ranche."

"I have not; but those fellows who were here yesterday told me that they would let me have an answer to-morrow without fail, and if they give my price we shall have nothing to grumble about when we go off homewards."

"Are they going to take it as it stands?"

"Yes, they don't care to have a lot of strangers about. You see, they may strike oil somewhere else; where there is one oil well, there are very often two, even three; and it is a fine thing to keep your neighhourhood fairly clear. They are going to use the house for the manager to live in; and as for the vines and all that sort of thing, they'll let all that slide. To-morrow we shall know; to-day, dearest, come out with me and let us go along towards the Lee Morrisons'. Mrs. Lee Morrison would like to see you, I know; and you haven't been there for a month."

"That is unkind of me," said Cynthia, "because Mrs. Lee Morrison has been very nice to me since I have been out here. Dick, I'd like to make her a present before I go back. She was good to you, wasn't she?"

"Very good. She nursed me in the last go of fever I had."

"Did she? You never told me that. Do you think, Dick, we could afford to give her the piano?"

"We can afford anything that you like in reason."

"Is the piano in reason, Dick? I know—I happen to know, it would be a great treat to that little woman. She plays exquisitely, and Lee Morrison has had such a hard fight with his ranche that he has never been able to afford even to hire one for her."

"Cynthia, dearest, how good and thoughtful and kind-hearted you are. Nobody but you would have thought of giving the little woman so much pleasure. We'll go and see her this afternoon, and then you can tell her your idea."

"Oh, no," cried Cynthia. "I'll send it over in a cart and let it be a surprise. Why, it's half the beauty of giving it to send it as a surprise," she laughed. "But I'll go over with you. Dear little woman! I hope she doesn't think that I have neglected her."

"Oh," said Dick, easily, "she knows you have plenty to do. Don't worry about that. People out here don't spy into one's motives and count visits, as they do over in the old country. Child, if you have not been able to keep up with your callers here, what the dickens will you do when you get to Hollingridge?"

"It will be different at Hollingridge."

"Will it? I believe that my mother had sixty-three families on her visiting list; I gathered as much the last time I heard the subject mentioned. You have to call on each so many times a year; you have to call

after every dinner party and every function, and they have to do as much for you. You will have to play the Lady Bountiful to the entire village; to go down and hear the kids read in the school—you know the kind of thing—'John—was—a—good—little—boy.' You'll have to give away prizes; you'll have to give a cup for the Agricultural Show, and very likely you'll have to present the awards. You'll have to go along doing the civil and the gracious until your soul is sick within you."

"I'll do it," said she, confidently. "Oh, I'll do it."

"Now my mother," he went on, "had a certain genius for that kind of thing. I went out with her one afternoon just before I came down to Blankhampton, and she took me what she was pleased to call 'a round of visits.' A round of visits! Seventeen houses did we go to, and she timed every one of them so that there wasn't a soul at home. When we got to the last one, she was getting to feel peckish; so she was very pleased to go in like a dignified Gulf Stream and talk about nothing for twenty minutes. She told me as we drove up the avenue that there was a pretty daughter there. She wasn't my idea of prettiness."

"But you hadn't seen me then."

"No, I hadn't seen you, child. And yet, I think I must have done somewhere in my dreams, or in some other incarnation, because when I first saw you that morning in St. Thomas's Street, I knew, somehow or other, that you were the other half of my soul, and everything that I had ever admired or wanted from the beginning of time."

Within a week from that time Dick had brought

the negotiations for the sale of the ranche to a conclusion, and the time when they would be able to leave California for ever came within measurable distance. Cynthia went to and fro as gaily as any bird, with always a snatch of a song on her lips and such unfeigned satisfaction about her whole mien that Dick was constrained to laugh at her every time that they met.

"I believe," he said to her one morning, when she was gaily planning out the programme for their return journey, "I believe you hate California."

"Oh, I do," she exclaimed; "I do. It's so unlike everything that I had pictured. I have no doubt the air is lovely, dear, I don't deny it for a moment—but air isn't quite everything. How you could exist here for seven long weary years I can't think. But of course you knew it was only for a time; it wasn't your life, it was only a kind of slice out of it. Of course, I owe California one debt," she said; "it gave you to me."

"Yes, we shall of course owe it that debt," said Dick.

"Yes. It not only gave you to me, Dick, it preserved you for me. No, I don't mean your chest; I don't believe there was ever anything much the matter with that; but if you had gone on in England, you certainly would have been married long before I had the chance of meeting you."

"Not at all. I don't believe I should ever have married."

"Ah, that is as may be. Anyway, here we are, man and wife, and we must make the best of each other."

She uttered the words with an air of offering a

challenge, and Dick, who was still desperately in love, caught her in his arms and merged the husband in the lover instantly.

"Oh, child, child," he cried, "do you think you will always make the best of me?"

"Well, I'll try," she replied, coquettishly, "I'll try. It will be hard, but I'll do my best."

Dick still held her tight clasped to his breast. "You promise me that you will?"

"Dick," she said, reproachfully, "haven't you any faith in me? Haven't I promised you the same thing over and over again? One would think that there was some sort of Damocles' sword hanging over your head; that some bogey man might come round the corner and wrest me away from you, whether I would or not. I daresay we shall have a few rubs in our married life; other people all seem to have them. What have you in your mind? Nothing, I hope, that I have said or looked or done?"

"Nothing," he said, "except that I have not yet got used to the fact that you are mine. I always feel that something or somebody might come in and tear you away from me."

"Make your mind quite easy on that score, dear Dick," said she. "All the world isn't going to run after me because you happen to be in love with me. Don't forget—although, mind you, I think it is very bad policy on my part to cheapen myself to you—but don't forget that I lived to be eighteen years old and never had a lover until you came along."

"Not one?"

"Well, no, not a real one. There were one or two

young men who cast sheep's eyes at me, but somehow it never went any further than that. I used," she went on, "sometimes in the bright summer evenings, when I saw all the girls in Gatehouses with their young men dangling after them—you know how life runs in a little place like that, a little tennis, a little boating, a little dancing, and then there's an engagement and a lot of wedding presents and another couple started—I used to wonder whether I should ever be like one of those girls and have a man to order about, to be at my beck and call, to carry my tennis racket and my tennis shoes, and generally make himself useful, to bring me flowers, and you know, Dick, all the rest of it. And then——"

"Well?"

"I used to shake my head and say, 'No, Cynthia Meredith, you are most unfortunately placed. You are like Mahomet's coffin, hanging midway between earth and heaven. You are not one of those lucky girls up there with a nice villa and a tennis ground, an ample allowance, and a mother who could give dinner parties and all the rest of it, and yet you are not the ordinary stuff of which village schoolmistresses are made. The young men of the tennis grounds will never want to marry you, and you will never want to marry the young man who would be willing to marry the schoolmistress; and so you must look on all your life and make believe that the onlooker who sees most of the game has the best time."

"And yet when the young man came along who was willing to marry the schoolmistress," said Dick, "you found yourself quite willing to marry him."

"It's very wonderful, Dick, isn't it? Sometimes," she went on, "I find myself thinking about the circumstances of our marriage. There seemed to be a sort of fate about it. Did it ever strike you, Dick?"

"Yes, many times."

"So strange that mother should have insisted on coming out here. Do you know, Dick, I can tell you now what I never liked to tell you before."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Well, poor mother, just at last you know, she got the most extraordinary idea about you."

"Your mother did?"

"Yes. She fancied you had some special reason for not wanting her to see my father's grave."

"I had."

"What was it?"

"Well, I hardly know how to put it. I could not see that any good could come of such a pilgrimage, and in that rough place there might have come harm."

"I thought that too, then," said Cynthia simply; "but sometimes, Dick, if I happen to be awake at night, as I am now and again, I get thinking, and I wonder whether I ought not to look upon her great wish as a sacred trust, and to go to Midas Creek in her place."

CHAPTER XXXI.

VALENTINE CLEGG.

AT last the day of departure had come. Santa Clara no longer belonged to Dick and Cynthia. The purchase money, an enormous sum, had been duly arranged for, and Cynthia Vincent, her boxes already stowed in the wagon which would carry them down to Freeman's Rock, was taking a last farewell of the house which had been her husband's home for seven years.

"Good-bye, old house," she cried, "good-bye, dreary view, good-bye everything and everybody. Mr. Frogg, you have been very nice to me since I have been here. I wish you were coming home to England."

At this the manager laughed. "No, Mrs. Vincent, there's no room for me in England," he replied.

"I don't believe in that. For my part, I'd rather live in a cottage in England than in the grandest palace that ever was built in San Francisco."

"But you haven't seen San Francisco."

"No, but I have seen Santa Clara and the surrounding neighbourhood, and I had a glimpse of Freeman's Rock as I came through. Now, if you come to England, be sure you come and see me."

"Thank you a thousand times."

"Meantime I wish you all the luck in the world, but I wish you weren't going to have it here."

"Don't set him against the place, Cynthia," said Dick.

"No, no. I could have no influence over Mr. Frogg, not in that way. He's a hard person that likes a barren land. And I'm going home to dear England —to lovely Hollingridge, all green and cool and beautiful. And, oh, I am so happy. I feel like a child going home after the longest term that any child ever stayed at a boarding school—an uncomfortable boarding school."

"Have you been so very miserable with us, Mrs. Vincent?"

"I haven't been miserable at all. How could I? But all the same, it's been an exile, and I'll not pretend anything else."

"If you don't stop chattering and get in," said Dick Vincent, "there'll be no going to old England or anywhere else."

"I stand rebuked," cried Cynthia, gaily. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Frogg, good-bye. Be sure to come and see us if you ever find yourself in the old country again."

The little woman to whom she had given the piano was waiting a little way down the dreary road in order to wish her a last God-speed. "I shall miss you," she said, rather wretchedly, "in spite of the great pleasure that you have brought into my life."

"Oh, the piano?" cried Cynthia. "Think of me when you play it, and keep a corner in your hearts for us. Good luck be with you. Good-bye!"

"There!" she said to Dick, as they rattled along, "we're off at last. We will never go back, Dick."

"No," echoed Dick, "we'll never go back. Take care of your arm, child; take care of your arm."

Oh, she was so gay as they rattled along. In her heart there was one song of thankfulness which kept rising to her lips in snatches—

"We're going home! We're going home!"

How like and yet how wide apart were the thoughts of the husband and wife as they jolted along the uneven road. Cynthia was openly and childishly glad at being about to turn her back on California; Dick was equally well satisfied to do so, though for a very different reason. In truth to him the time they had passed at Santa Clara had seemed interminable; every day he had got out of his bed with a feeling that before he got into it again some accident might have revealed the fact which he was so anxiously concealing from his wife. Once clear of the country and settled at Hollingridge, he knew that he need have no fear of any such accident befalling him. He was not likely in that quiet, far-off country home ever to meet again with any one of the persons who had been witnesses of that terrible tragedy, the tragedy which still weighed upon his mind with a sense of unmitigated horror. They had got now to within a few hours of what to him meant safety. Or, stay; that was not exactly the term which he used to himself—what to him meant peace of mind which was not likely ever to be broken. He could not help thinking, as they rode along, how wonderfully everything had worked together to help him to conceal the unpalatable truth. How determined that little woman had been that she would sift the whole affair to the bottom. How sus-

picious she had been—how determined—how ruthless in her unquenchable desire to have always absolutely her own way. And her own way had practically killed her. Well, so far as happiness was concerned, Dick knew perfectly well that he would not suffer in that respect by the death of his wife's mother. And Cynthia, dear, tender-hearted little girl that she was, had been smitten by a qualm of conscience. She had taken into her dear little head that perhaps she ought, as a duty, to go to Midas Creek as a substitute for her mother. Well, he had nipped that in the bud at once.

"I could not convince your mother that it was wiser she did not go near the place where your father died," he said to her. "Don't you think, dearest, that if your mother had been intended to go there she would have been spared to do so?"

"I never thought of that," was Cynthia's reply; "and, of course, dear Dick, if you would rather that I didn't go, I'll never give it another thought again."

"I would much rather you did not go," he said. "I never like to think that my greatest friend, whom I trusted and loved all the seven years that we lived together, came by his end in such a horrible way. I like to remember him as we were together at Santa Clara: when he was so easy, so considerate, so kindly to everybody. I tell you candidly, Cynthia, that I know exactly what I should hear if we went to Midas Creek, and I shrink from hearing it. He is dead: his hour had come; nothing that we can do would bring him back to life again, so pray don't let us do anything. We must pass through Midas Creek, be-

cause we get on to the cars there—but don't let us stop. I hate to think of the place as associated with him."

And she had instantly fallen in with his ideas, declaring that she believed him to be perfectly right, and that for her part she hated these wild, out-of-the-way savage places, and never wanted to find herself in any one of them. "It was only an idea, Dick," she said, "a foolish idea, but you know I have been through a great deal lately, and I get ideas in my head at times."

"Well, don't get any more ideas on that subject, dearest," he said, "it can do no good. You might fret yourself to fiddle-strings feeling that if you had only persuaded your mother to be quiet, or to do other than she did, she might still be with us. That would be all very well if we could look forward as we can look backward. If I had known that your father would get drinking again the moment that my influence was taken away from him, I would never have left him at all; I wouldn't have come home."

"Oh, but you couldn't go through life as his jailer."

"Well, to all intents and purposes I was his jailer."

For a moment she sat looking up at him. "Dick," she said, "I don't like to think about my father. I wish he had lived for mother's sake. Do you think that I will ever go the same way that he did?"

"Oh, my dear delicious little person, no; certainly not. What a ludicrous idea! Put such a notion out of your dear little head this moment. You mustn't think too much of his having been a drinker; he was

nobody's enemy so much as his own. You must take the circumstances of his life into consideration; his temptations—his careless, gay, easy-going, good-natured bonhommie. He was a dear good fellow all through, but for this one little weakness—well, I am afraid I must say this one great weakness—and he was a good sort—a good friend."

"He was a very bad husband," said Cynthia, half resentfully.

"Well, yes; he was a bad husband." And then a memory came back to Dick of a steel hand in a velvet glove, and he knew, beyond all certainty of doubt, that had he been the husband of Cynthia's mother he would probably have acted very much as Cynthia's father had done.

He thought over this conversation as they rode along.

"You look quite moody, Dick," said Cynthia, turning her radiant eyes upon him.

"Moody? I never felt less moody in my life," he declared. "I was thinking, that was all. You know, child, a man cannot put seven years of his life behind him without a certain feeling of sadness—at least, I can't."

"But you are putting them behind you for me."

"I wasn't regretting you," he said. "Pray don't get such a thought as that in your mind."

I need not go into all the details of the long and weary drive down to Freeman's Rock. "I am so tired, Dick," said Cynthia, as at last they came to the first straggling huts of the little town. "I do like civilization, Dick; this kind of life would not have

suited me at all. I think I should have gone mad if I had had to live here."

"Ah, well, you would have got used to it. Thank heaven you needn't; and that you will always be able to afford a carriage and pair and a Pullman car."

"Yes, the cars are all right, but, oh, Dick, I don't like being off the beaten track."

She clutched at his arm nervously as they drew up at the door of the hotel.

"There's nothing to be frightened of," he said, soothingly. "Don't let yourself get full of fancies. You are nervous and unstrung; you are tired out. We'll get some dinner, such as it is, and we'll be off to bed in good time. Remember the coach starts very early in the morning."

She was even more nervous as they approached Midas Creek.

"I feel as if I were going to see ghosts," she said, shiveringly, to him.

"Nonsense! nonsense! You will see nothing to upset you, child. It is a shade better than Freeman's Rock, and it isn't as if we had to stop there."

"We get straight on to the cars, don't we?"

"Yes, yes, child. We are just in time. We shall have something like twenty minutes to spare. You will get something like a decent dinner on the cars; and mind, we haven't had that since we got off them three months ago."

It was very strange, but the girl was possessed of a curious shrinking feeling that everybody in Midas Creek must recognise her as the daughter of the man who had a few months before been turned into the

likeness of a wild beast. Her nervousness was sufficient, naturally enough, to give Dick courage. In soothing her fears he forgot how intensely he had dreaded this momentary touch with the town where Meredith had died.

It was with a simultaneous breath of relief that the husband and wife found themselves once more on the cars which would carry them away from Midas Creek.

"Good-bye, good-bye! That is the last we shall see of California," said Cynthia, waving her hand towards the little town. "Now, Dick, you and I are going to begin to live."

How she enjoyed the cup of tea which Dick ordered for her immediately! How, after the inconveniences of the make-shift life at Santa Clara, she revelled in the completeness of the luxury which she found as soon as they were once aboard the cars!

"I am going to settle down and do nothing; to rest myself," she said, when she and Dick had gone back to the saloon. "It will take me three days to get over the awful jolting of that dreadful journey from Santa Clara down to Midas Creek. Dick, I feel old and haggard."

"Well, you look neither one nor the other," he replied. "But the more you can rest, the better for you. Then you will be fit and well, to have a few days with the Sergeantsons, before we go on board the 'City of Boston.' What are you going to do now?"

"I am going to stay here quietly and read this book. I have got a lovely new book from that black waiter just come up with a trayful of them."

"And I," said Dick, "if you really don't mind being left, would like to go into the smoking-car and have a pipe."

"My dear boy," she cried, "pray do! You must be as tired as I am, and as longing for your little luxuries."

"I am longing for a pipe," he said with a laugh, "so I shall leave you. If you want me, send one of these coloured gentlemen after me."

Then Dick left his wife, passing through the next car and into the smoking car, where he took a vacant seat about half-way between the two doors. As he took up his pipe and his tobacco pouch, a man who was sitting on the other side of the car put down a newspaper and looked across at him. For a moment Dick was puzzled. It was a face he knew—yes, but he could not put a name to it. Where had he seen that man? Somewhere; but where?

Then the stranger got up and came to the chair next to him. "I guess you've forgotten me," he said. "My name is Valentine Clegg."

CHAPTER XXXII.

TOUCH AND GO.

As the words which disclosed his identity left Valentine Clegg's lips, Dick suddenly felt that he was undone. So, after all, chance and luck had failed him. He had gone right through the very midst of danger and his luck had served him; now, at the last moment, he felt himself deserted by Dame Fortune. He could not expect to avoid a meeting between Cynthia and this man, this man who knew him for what he was—the one who had taken her father's life. In the flurry of the moment he quite forgot that Valentine Clegg had from first to last sympathised with him before everything. He forgot everything except that his wife was on board the train, and that he must make one last effort to keep the truth from her. He felt now, with a wild gush of poignant regret, that he had taken the wrong course with her. He felt that it would have been wiser and the better plan to have openly, from the first moment, disclosed the truth that it was a shot from his revolver which had ended Roger Meredith's life. It would have been easy enough to prove, had proof been necessary, that he had had little or no choice in the matter; but now nothing could take away, if the facts ever came to Cynthia's knowledge, the one damning mistake of his

having deceived her. She would have forgotten the accident; she would never forgive the concealment. He had meant it kindly enough at the first. He had not liked to say to the little widow, with her eyes full of tears, that his had been the hand to bring her husband's ignoble career to an end. He had done it to spare her feelings entirely. He recalled bitterly, as Valentine Clegg talked on and he aimlessly gave answers at random, how little she, that soft-eyed, velvet-gloved woman, had ever considered his wishes, his likes, his desires. He might have spared himself the trouble now—now everything was on the verge of disclosure. The whole fabric of his happiness might, during the next hour, fall about his ears like a pack of cards.

He quickly determined that he would leave the cars at the next stopping-place, though he could not imagine what excuse he should make to Cynthia herself for doing so, more especially as their luggage was expressed right through to New York. Still, he could not run the risk of her meeting with Valentine Clegg.

"I see," said Mr. Clegg, "that the very sight of me has knocked you over. You needn't let it do that, my dear fellow. I never sympathised with anybody more in my life than I did with you. What happened was absolutely unavoidable; and for the matter of that, Meredith was such an out-and-out blackguard, that you really did a service to the entire world by ridding it of him. I told you so at the time."

"Yes, I know you had a bad opinion of Meredith."

"I had that same," said the stranger in an emphatic tone. "I knew Meredith inside out. I had known

him for years and years and years. He was a wrong 'un; a bad hat. The world's no poorer for his demise."

"No," said Dick, "you are wrong there. There was good in him, and plenty of it. It was only that besetting curse of drink that made him what he sometimes was."

Valentine Clegg looked up at Dick in genuine amazement. "Say," said he, "you are not qualifying for a finger-post, are you?"

Dick shook his head. "No, far from it—very far from it. I never had any qualification for preaching to others; I have less than ever now."

"Oh, my dear chap, you take a wrong view of it altogether. I tell you you didn't know the fellow. You'd think no more about it, if you knew him as I did, than a butcher thinks when he fells an ox, or a policeman when he kills a mad dog."

"As a matter of fact," said Dick, "I did know him; I'd known him intimately for years. Believe me, there was a lot of good in poor old Meredith. I have never quite got over it; I shall never be quite the same man again."

"Well, I think you take a wrong view of it," said Valentine Clegg. "Of course, since you say there was good in the chap, I won't dispute it; I am glad to hear it, but I didn't know it—that's all. I don't think you will find many men ready to endorse your opinion. But still that's neither here nor there. The thing was done, it was an accident—at least, it takes about the same rank as an accident—and I dont' like to see you, a fine young fellow like you, brooding over

what could not possibly be helped. Put it out of your mind, my dear fellow; leave it behind you; don't think about it again. After all, what's done can never be undone in this world—not where it has to do with a six-shooter."

"You are very kind," said Dick. "I can never sufficiently express to you how entirely grateful I was for the advice you gave me when we met before. I have wished more than once that I had stayed and faced it out; but perhaps you were right, and it was the easiest way out of the difficulty."

"I am sure of it," said Valentine Clegg, "perfectly certain of it; and the jury showed their appreciation of my idea by the verdict they brought in. Well, I saw that meeting me knocked you over, but don't let me disturb you. I am getting off the cars in a couple of hours from now; I only go as far as Mexville."

The stranger then skilfully turned the subject away from that of Roger Meredith's death, and talked on in the most friendly way on quite different matters. And as they talked, Dick kept turning over in his mind how he could avoid a meeting with Cynthia, or how he could convey to him that Cynthia was in total ignorance of that particular episode in her husband's life.

At last, when they were summoned to dinner, and Valentine Clegg rose, as if it were the most natural thing that they should dine together, he had no choice but to inform him that he was not travelling alone.

"By the way," he said, "I have got my wife with me."

"So?" Been married long?"

"No, only a few months—well, almost less than a few months."

"Really? I hope you will present me to Madame."

"I shall be delighted to. There's just one thing——"

"I suppose she knows nothing?" interposed Mr. Clegg.

"Not a word," said Dick, "not a word. I wouldn't have her know it for anything."

"That's natural enough—presupposing that she's an Englishwoman. One of our women, you know, wouldn't mind."

"I don't know. She is an Englishwoman," said Dick.

"My dear sir, I'll be as mum as a cherub carved in marble on a tombstone."

He followed Dick into the dining-car, where Cynthia, being healthily hungry, had already taken her place at the table assigned to them. Dick felt, as he walked between the rows of little tables, that it was a case of now or never, touch and go.

He knew that hesitation would be fatal, so putting the best face possible upon his nervousness, he walked straight up to Cynthia.

"Dearest," he said, "I have met an old friend of mine—Mr. Valentine Clegg. We have been having a great time together. I hope you haven't been lonely."

"Dear Dick," I have been asleep," she replied. "I feel ten thousand times better for it. Mr. Clegg, I am most pleased to meet any old friend of my husband's. How do you do?"

Valentine Clegg took Cynthia's hand. "Mrs.

Martin, ma'am," said he, "I am most pleased to make your acquaintance."

"My name isn't Martin," said Cynthia, "it's Vincent. My husband's name is Vincent."

For a moment Valentine Clegg's jaw dropped, and Dick felt a ringing in his ears that was almost insupportable. The sharpness of the American, however, saved the situation.

"Did I say 'Martin?' God bless my soul! What tricks one's tongue serves one! Of course your name is Vincent. But I am getting old, my dear lady—that's the truth. I remember when I was a boy my father used to call 'Tom-Dick-Harry-John-Jack!' He seldom got to the right name until we supplied it ourselves."

"Ah, yes. And travelling does tire you, doesn't it? I am worn out," said Cynthia. "Well, are you going to join us at this table?"

"If you will allow me, ma'am, I shall be extremely flattered and honoured."

"Oh, don't say that. We shall be very glad of your company, shan't we, Dick?"

"Oh, very glad," said Dick.

A grim thought crossed his mind of an old saying that had long obtained in the Vincent family. It was to the effect that he might very comfortably put any gladness he felt in his eye and be none the worse for it.

Cynthia was still very gay at the prospect of going home, and exerted herself to the utmost to be pleasant and charming to this friend of her husband's. She talked gaily and naturally of her joy in seeing the

last of California, and the intense happiness she felt at going home to her own country.

"It's not because we're insular," she said, "I am not at all an insular person, but I do like comfort. The hideous discomfort of life out in new countries is too much for me. It's like getting up too early in the morning, before the world is aired. I like my world aired for me by people having lived in it for a few hundreds of years."

Thus she rattled on, and Valentine Clegg, always, though he was a plain man himself, attracted by a pretty woman, fell in with her humour and talked his hardest. Nor was Dick himself the least silent of the three. In truth he was so afraid that she would in some way give him away, that he, too, talked nineteen to the dozen, and theirs was the merriest table in the whole car.

At last, when the meal had nearly come to a conclusion, Cynthia happened to drop her handkerchief. It was a filmy little square of finest silk muslin, profusely embroidered in black, with an elaborate monogram in one corner. It happened that Valentine Clegg was the first to perceive the loss, and he stooped and picked it up with a gallant air, which showed that Cynthia had impressed him very favourably. Cynthia took the handkerchief with a smile and a word of thanks, laying it on the corner of the table between them. It happened thus that the corner which bore the monogram lay uppermost, and presently Mr. Clegg chanced to notice it.

"How curious!" he said, speaking with involuntary surprise, "that I should make the mistake of calling

you Mrs. Martin, and you have got a monogram which is marked 'C. M.'—Cynthia Martin."

"Well, it is funny," said Cynthia; "it looks rather fishy, to tell the truth, but our name is Vincent. Now you are wondering what the 'C. M.' stands for. It stands for Cynthia Meredith—which was my maiden name."

"Cynthia Meredith!" repeated Mr. Clegg. "Was your name Meredith?"

At this point of the conversation Dick gave himself up for lost. He never looked at Cynthia nor Valentine Clegg; he went on arranging bits of cheese and butter on a biscuit with an intensity which such an occupation did not warrant.

"Yes, my name was Meredith," said she.

Valentine Clegg looked at Dick, then back at Cynthia. "And were you by any chance the daughter of Roger Meredith?"

"Yes, I was Roger Meredith's only child."

"The man who was killed at Midas Creek?"

"Yes," speaking sadly, "the same."

"But how came he to have a daughter like you?"

"I don't know. I was his daughter, but he had been out here for fifteen years. I hadn't seen him since I was three years old."

"I see. Well, Mrs. Vincent," glancing at his watch, "I shall be getting off the cars in a few minutes now, but I must tell you something before I say good-bye to you. I was there when Meredith was killed."

"You?" She looked at him with all her soul in her grey eyes. Dick's eyes were rivetted on her face.

"I don't want to say a word against your father, even though you hadn't seen him for fifteen years," said Valentine Clegg, "but you know he had a failing; it is a failing a good many men have out in the wilder parts of the world."

"I know," said Cynthia, "I know."

"Well, it was very sad—when a good man goes wrong, it is always very sad—but I was there, Mrs. Vincent, and I saw the whole thing from beginning to end. I knew Meredith years before. It was a pity he came by his end like that, but practically the whole affair was an accident. The other fellow had no choice; it was one life or the other. If ever you hear to the contrary, you have my word for it that the whole thing was as much an accident as if Meredith had dropped a lighted match into a box of dynamite. There—the cars are slowing down, so I will bid you good-bye. I am glad to have met you, very glad; more so than you'll ever know. We shall probably never meet again, but whatever you hear in the time to come, remember that you have my word for it that your father's death was neither more nor less than an accident. So, good-bye! God bless you both!"

He took her hand, holding it fast in his own for a minute or so, then he turned round to Dick. "Good-bye, old fellow," he said. "You know where to write to if I can ever do anything to serve you. Good-bye! God bless you! I am glad to have seen you, and seen you together."

"I'll come and see you off the cars," said Dick.

When he returned the cars were once more in

motion. Cynthia was sitting precisely where he had left her.

"Dick," she said, in a tone of conviction and with a deadly earnestness that completely startled him, "I am not sentimental, I don't look at things as my mother did, but that was the man who shot my father!"

"No, no," cried Dick.

"Dick, I am certain of it; I am convinced of it."

"You are wrong, my child—you are wrong; I assure you you are wrong."

"No, Dick, I am not wrong. That was the man who shot my father."

"Well, if he did," said Dick, suddenly feeling a deadly sickness creeping over him, "the whole affair was, as he put it himself, practically an accident."

"Yes, yes, I know that; I am not saying anything about that; but Dick, I have sat at meat with him—I have laughed and joked with him—and after all, one's father is one's father."

For a moment Dick Vincent did not speak. "Dearest," he said, as his face was pale and his voice shook a little in spite of himself, "I knew your father much better than either his wife or you. Believe me, if he could speak to you now he would tell you to put such an idea out of your head altogether. There are times in one's life—in everyone's life—when the most grave and important acts must be decided on the spur of the moment. The man who shot your father in self-defence is, I feel certain, carrying with him a burden which will only fall from him with the grave. Nobody blamed him."

"He might have spoken out," said Cynthia.

"No, he was advised at the time that the easiest way would be to keep silence. When once a man has put his hand to the plough, there can be no turning back!"

THE END.

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